Malawi Household Food Security Bulletin

Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (mVAM) on the Effects of COVID-19 in Malawi – *Round 2*

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

⇒ The food security situation remains stable, with almost all households across the country classified as having acceptable to borderline food consumption and households employing less emergency food and fewer livelihood-based coping strategies.

⇒ Physical access to markets has remained the same in the current round as that in the previous one indicating continuing of market functionality, which is a key element as the lean season approaches

⇒ Reported cases of fever, cough, and difficulty in breathing have decreased in this round.

BACKGROUND

While the country has enjoyed good crop production this year, realizing an 11.5% increase in maize compared to last season [1], COVID-19 is still likely to adversely impact food security in the coming months. It is in consideration of this that WFP has put in place remote household monitoring to track changes in food security as influenced by COVID-19.

METHODOLOGY

The second round of remote household survey data collection in response to COVID-19 monitoring and seasonal trends in food security took place in June/July 2020. The survey for this report was conducted using live telephone calls from the 15th of June to the 14th of July 2020, collecting information from some 1,928 households in all districts and major cities.

The sample size was calculated based on the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Technical Manual (Version 3.0) guideline of having at least 150 samples per strata. Additional details on this methodology are available in Annex 1. The three regions of the country (ADM1) and four major cities (Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Blantyre, and Zomba) were divided into 14 strata. Integrated stratification was conducted whereby each city was a stratum on its own to track the effects of COVID-19 in each city separately, as cities are likely to be most adversely affected by the impact/ severity of COVID-19, and the impact might differ from city to city. Districts were stratified by clustering those with similar livelihood activities together while maintaining a maximum of four districts per stratum. Participants were randomly selected from a national database of mobile subscribers. Respondents opted in to the mobile call survey and were asked questions on socio-demographics, food consumption, coping behaviour, market access, health condition, and assistance received.

As of 2016, 54% of households in Malawi had a mobile phone (MDHS 2015-16). As such, it is acknowledged that household-level mobile surveys contain a certain level of inherent bias. Due to these biases, an attempt is made to capture patterns and trends. This first round of data collection provides the basis of a monitoring system that will track month-to-month changes. In terms of weights, the results are computed by applying a population weight at each respective district level (Admin 1) in order to debias the data.

[1] Ministry of Agriculture, March 2020. Second round Agricultural Production Estimate Survey (APES) report. Lilongwe. Malawi.

21 August 2020

KEY FINDINGS

Food Consumption Score (FCS)

Findings from Round Two of data collection showed that most households—some 91%—are currently classified as having acceptable food consumption. This is an increase from 88% in the first round and is typical at this time of year, as Malawi is in the post-harvest period and is experiencing an above-average yield for not only maize but many other key food crops. This allows for the consumption of a diversified diet. Only 9% of households were classified as having borderline food consumption, with none classified as having poor food consumption, compared to 11% classified as having borderline and 1% classified as having poor food consumption in the First-Round survey (Figure 1).

Some 95% of households residing in urban areas were classified as having acceptable food consumption against 89% of households in rural areas. Although acceptable food consumption was prevalent across all three regions of the country, slightly more households (92%) in the Rural Southern Region were classified as having acceptable food consumption compared to the Rural Northern and Rural Central Regions (88% each) (Figure 1). These observations will continue to be monitored in subsequent reports to establish trends and provide a clear picture of food consumption patterns across the regions.

Reduced Coping Strategies (rCSI)

Overall, the mean Reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) in the Second-Round survey was six (6), which is low and typical for the post-harvest period when food from one's own production is abundant, and households are not resorting to many or severe coping strategies to access food. When looking at food security within rural Malawi, districts were grouped into strata. The groupings of Nsanje and Chikwawa; Mulanje, Phalombe and Zomba; Machinga and Mangochi; Lilongwe Rural and Dedza; and Ntchisi, Dowa, Mchinji and Kasungu had the highest mean rCSI (8), which is still within the low ranges expected for the post-harvest season. The lowest rCSI (4) was observed in Blantyre City, followed by Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba cities (5) (Figure 2).

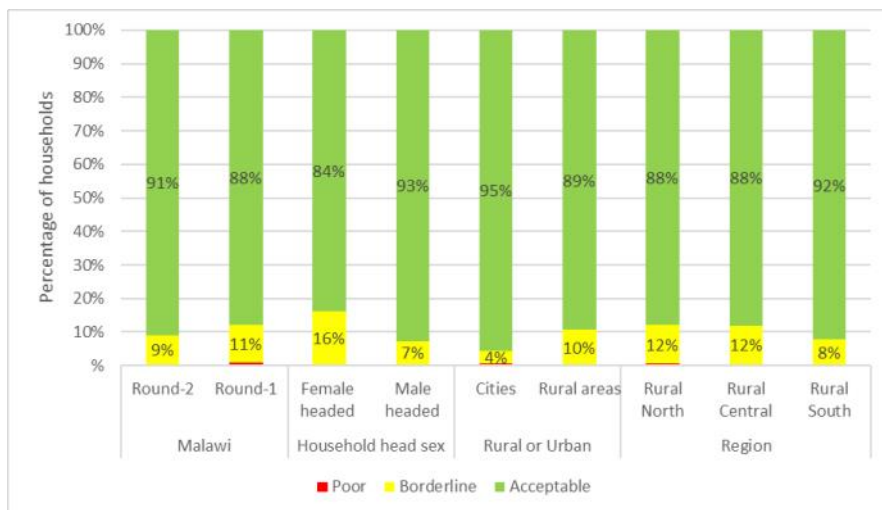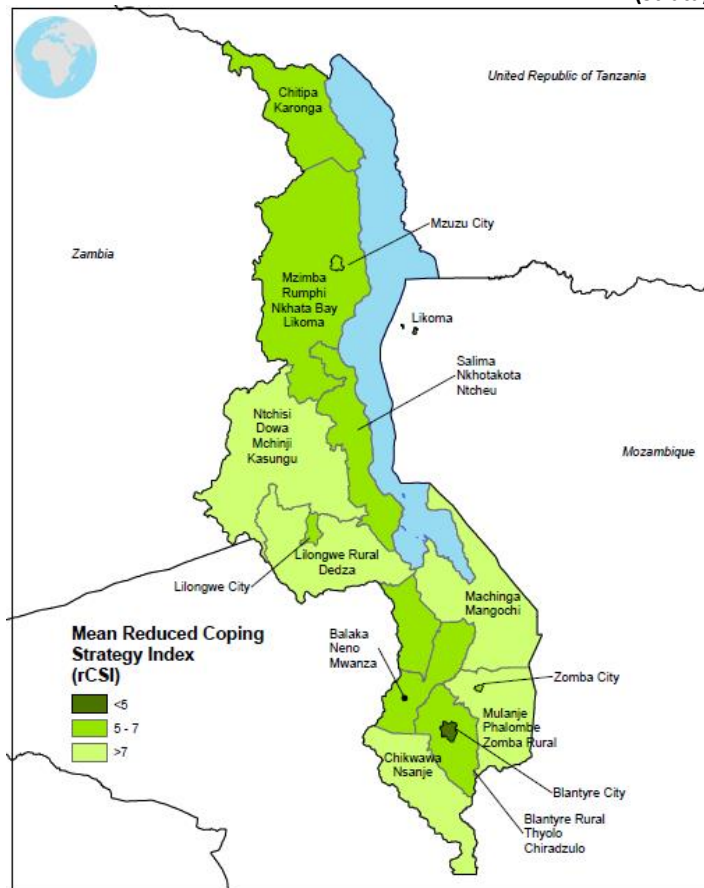**Figure 1: Percentage of Households by Classification of Food Consumption Score**

Figure 2: Map of Malawi Showing Mean rCSI by District Grouping (Strata)

In this Second Round, 7% of surveyed households in the country reported that they relied on the most severe consumption-based coping strategies (rCSI ≥19), meaning that these households were reducing their food portion to enable children to have food to eat in a day as well as going a full day without food. This is an improvement from the First-Round survey whereby 13% of the households relied on the most-severe coping strategies to make ends meet. In 2018 and 2019, at this same time of year, the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) collected nation-wide household-level data capturing consumption-based negative coping strategies. The results showed that some 20% of households in 2019 and 15% in 2018 were resorting to strategies classified as most severe in order to make ends meet. This means that, overall, the food security situation in 2020 is currently less severe as compared to the two previous years. This follows an increase in crop production from the 2019/2020 growing season for almost all crops compared to the 2018/2019 season. For instance, maize production increased by 11.5%, rice by 6.5%, and sorghum by 4.2%. Increased production of pulses was also observed. Further, during the Second-Round Survey, households had less severe food insecurity compared to the First-Round survey. [2]

The data also showed that 48% of all surveyed households reported that they had used moderately severe behaviours (rCSI 4-18)—such as borrowing food from friends or relatives and/or adults skipping meals in order to provide for children—compared to 51% of surveyed households during the First-Round survey. An additional 45% of the households reported that they had employed at least one of the least severe behaviours of eating less preferred foods and/or reducing the number of meals (rCSI 0-3) (Table 1).

The situation seems to have improved during the Second Round. However, it is highly likely that this situation might worsen as the 2020/2021 lean season approaches in the coming months (Table 1). The survey results further illustrated that slightly more female-headed households (9%) were resorting to the use of more severe coping strategies compared to male-headed households (7%).

In the Second Round, households in rural areas (8%) applied more severe consumption-based coping strategies or a combination of several strategies as compared to households residing in cities (5%). Trend analysis will continue in subsequent reports as more data becomes available to determine the coping strategies trends between rural and urban households. Most households in cities have greater income-generating opportunities, including petty businesses to supplement income sources. As a result, they tend to employ less severe consumption-based strategies as compared to households in rural areas whose main income source is derived from the sale of agricultural produce.

During this reporting period, households within the Rural Central (11%) and Rural Southern Areas (10%) employed more severe strategies than households in the Rural Northern Areas (4%). This is likely in part due to the fact that, despite a good harvest this year, there are some pockets across the Southern and Central Regions that experienced poor harvests due to dry spells and/or a lack of farm inputs such as fertilizer.

[2]Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, March 2020. Agriculture Production Estimate Survey (APES), Lilongwe. Malawi

Table 1: Percentage of Households Employing Consumption-based Coping Strategies

		Phase 1 Least Severe	Phase 2 Moderately Severe	Phase 3+ Severe
Malawi	**Round-2**	45%	48%	7%
	Round-1	36%	51%	13%
Household head sex	**Female – headed**	38%	53%	9%
	Male - headed	46%	47%	7%
Rural or Urban	**Cities**	60%	36%	5%
	Rural areas	39%	52%	8%
Region	**Rural North**	41%	55%	4%
	Rural Central	37%	52%	11%
	Rural South	39%	50%	10%

The **Livelihood Coping Strategies Indicator (LCSI)** is derived from a series of questions regarding a household's experience with livelihood stress and asset depletion during the 30 days prior to the survey.
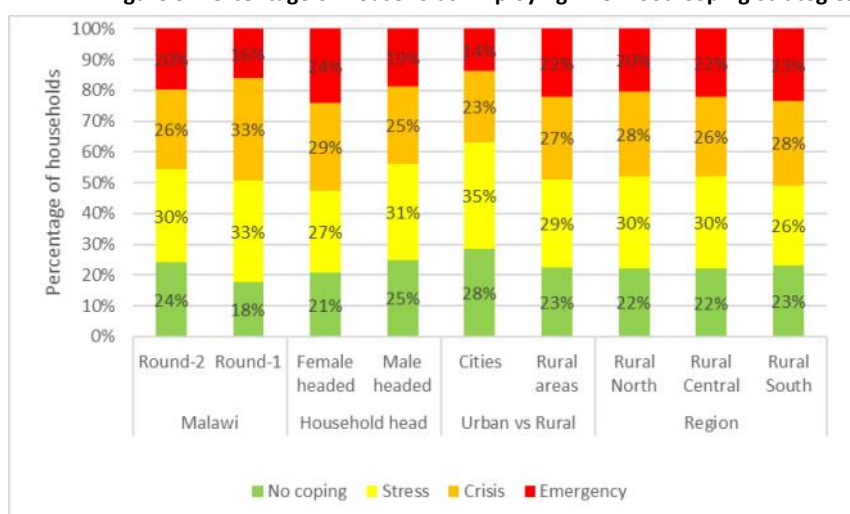
Coping is classified into broad categories: **Stress Strategies, Crisis Strategies, Emergency Strategies and Not coping/Food Secure**

Livelihood Coping Strategies

On average, 20% of surveyed households around the country reported that they had employed emergency livelihood-based coping strategies within the last 30 days to access food, an increase from 16% in Round One. While these figures are still low and typical for the post-harvest period, as most households are consuming food from their own production, the fact that some 16% of households are resorting to adverse livelihoods coping strategies to make ends meet is indicative that some households are starting to deplete their stocks and are thus resorting to coping strategies to maintain good consumption levels. An additional 26% of surveyed households were classified as using crisis and 30% reported that they were resorting to stressed coping strategies in this round as compared to 33% of surveyed households who were classified as utilizing crisis and stressed coping strategies in the First Round (Figure 3).

Female-headed households (24%) were employing slightly more emergency livelihoods coping strategies than male-headed households (19%). Additionally, a higher percentage of households residing in rural areas (22%) reported resorting to emergency coping strategies compared to households residing in urban areas (14%). Further, fewer households within urban areas reported not utilizing any adverse livelihoods coping strategies (some 14%) compared to households within rural areas (approximately 23%) (Figure 3). The use of emergency livelihood coping strategies did not differ significantly among the three regions with 23%, 22% and 20% of the households resorting to emergency strategies in the Rural Southern, Rural Central, and Rural Northern areas, respectively.

Figure 3: Percentage of Households Employing Livelihood Coping Strategies

Market Access

Surveyed households were asked if, in the last 14 days, they were unable to physically access the local markets or grocery stores, followed by the reasons for not visiting the market. Overall, 56% of the households reported to have unrestricted access to markets or shops, almost the same as the previous round. Similarly, as per Figure 4, no differences were observed between the First and Second Round by sex of household head, between urban and rural, and amongst the regions. The urban households continue to have higher physical access than the rural households due to high market dependency than the rural counterparts who are now mostly consuming from their own production.

Figure 4: Percentage of Households Reporting Unlimited Access to Markets/Shops
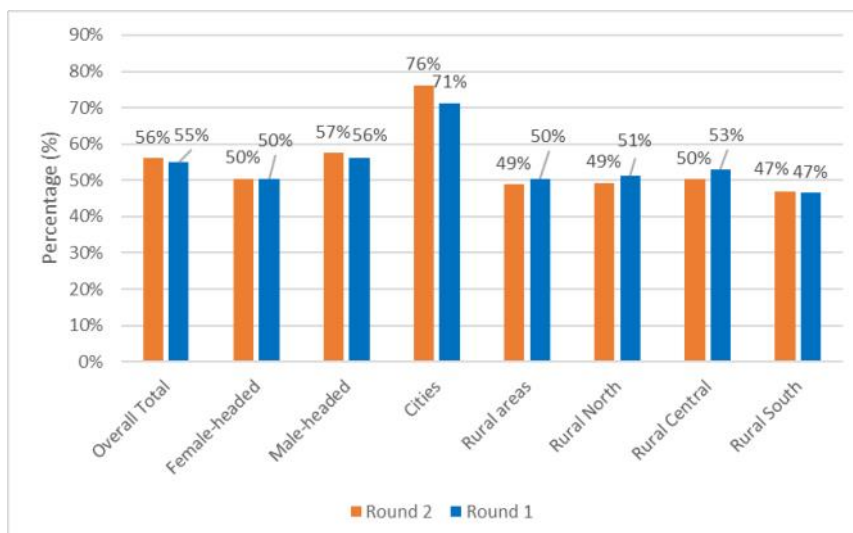
The same pattern between the First and Second Round reinforces the notion that no new COVID-19 mitigating measures have been imposed since the First Round and markets continue to operate normally. For those who did not physically access local markets, the majority mentioned that they did not do so due to a lack of money (82%), followed by concerns about going out due to disease outbreak (7%). Reported fear of COVID-19 hampering households' willingness to visit markets increased slightly from Round One (3%) to Round Two (7%), which may be due to ongoing sensitization campaigns vis-à-vis the coronavirus disease coupled with an uptick in cases in recent weeks (Figure 4).

Humanitarian Assistance

The Round Two data shows that a small percentage of interviewed households reported that they are receiving food assistance compared to 14% in Round One, with slightly more households residing in rural areas reporting having received assistance as compared to those in cities. The activation of the COVID-19 Response Plan by the Government has triggered a lot of health-based interventions/programmes while the crisis cash responses have not yet kicked off. It is also important to note that, at the time of this assessment, there was no reported or visible humanitarian crisis warranting a humanitarian response. As the country approaches the 2020/2021 Lean Season in the coming months, smallholder rural households may begin to run out of food from their own production and resort to markets and other means (piece-meal work, adverse coping strategies) for sourcing food. This trend is ubiquitous across rural areas for the entirety of the country.

Health Indicators Related to COVID-19

Households were asked whether at least one member had suffered from a fever, cough, and had difficulty breathing in the 14 days prior to the survey. During the Second Round of data collection, 46% of surveyed households reported that at least one member of their immediate family had fever, 38% had a cough, and 6% experienced difficult breathing. The Second Round shows lower levels of health-related indicators compared to the First Round.

It is important to note that, although these are the primary symptoms of COVID-19, there are numerous reasons why a household member may have one or more of these symptoms and that a household's response may not be directly associated with the coronavirus disease.

The study further reviewed the interaction between fever and cough; fever and difficulty breathing; and cough with difficulty breathing. Overall, 25% of the households had a combined illness of fever and cough, 4% had fever and difficulty breathing, while 6% had a cough and difficulty breathing. Compared to the previous round, fewer households reported that someone in their family had a fever with a cough, while reporting rates stayed nearly the same between Round One and Round Two for fever with difficulty breathing and cough with difficulty breathing (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of Households with at least One Member Suffering from Fever, Cough, or Difficulty in Breathing in the Past 14 Days
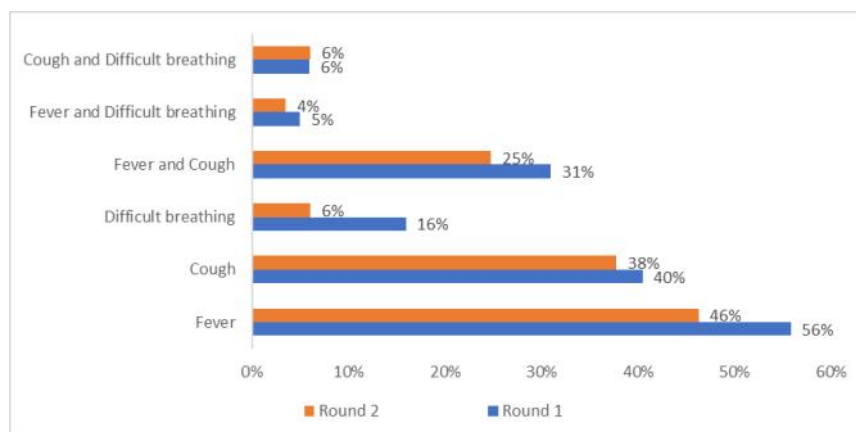
The **food security situation remains stable, with almost all households across the country classified as having acceptable to borderline food consumption** and households employing less emergency food and fewer livelihood-based coping strategies.

Physical access to markets has increased in the current round, indicating **improved functionality of markets**, which is a **key element as the lean season approaches**.

CONCLUSIONS

The good crop harvest realized this year has contributed to generally good food consumption for households across the country, with almost all surveyed households being classified as having acceptable or borderline food consumption, an indication of the consumption of diversified food groups.

The percentage of households using severe Reduced Consumption-based Coping Strategies and emergency Livelihood Coping Strategies is lower in the Second-Round survey compared to the First Round and remains low, indicating a stable food security situation. This is likely because households can access food without resorting to adverse coping strategies. The results indicate an improvement in the food security situation but require consistent monitoring, as conditions may start to deteriorate in the coming months as the number of COVID-19 positive cases within the country continues to increase coupled with the onset of the 2020/2021 Lean Season.

The Second-Round survey observed that households' access to markets remained almost the same as in the previous round. However, there is still a significantly high proportion of households (44%) who reported that they did not access markets. This could be attributed to the post-harvest period, as they are likely consuming from their own stocks coupled with potential fears of contracting COVID-19.

In summary, the food security situation is currently stable with the new harvest. That said, it is probable that Malawi will experience a worsening situation as the lean season approaches with the depletion of household food stocks and also due to the evolution of COVID-19, which might lead the Government to enact further or more severe mitigating measures to curtail its spread. Food security could further deteriorate due to market performance issues such as inflows and outflows of commodities as well as price increases. WFP will continue to monitor these factors rigorously and heighten this remote household food security monitoring as the season progresses towards lean period.

Annex: Sampling Methodology

⇒ The sample size was calculated based on the IPC guideline of a minimum of 150 per strata. The total sample size per strata is 180, as it includes a safety buffer of 30 in case the call center could not achieve the full sample in 30 days. Please find the IPC manual here and please refer to page 115, Table 28 for further details.

⇒ The sample was stratified at the ADM1 level to be able to report results at ADM1 level within 30 days of data collection.

⇒ The three regions in Malawi (ADM1) and the four cities of Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Blantyre and Zomba have been divided into 14 strata (ADM1 strata) and quotas have been provided at the ADM1 strata and district (ADM2) level. To compute ADM2 quotas we use Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) to make sure the results are representative at the ADM1 level.

⇒ All ADM1 strata quotas (daily, 10 days and monthly) and AMD2 caps (10 days and monthly) were reached for this sample.

⇒ In the subsequent rounds, WFP will switch to a panel approach after certain days of data collection, and these quotas will be updated to include the quotas for old/new respondents based on the methodology outlined.

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