

Malawi faces a food crisis: Why plans to avert hunger aren't realistic and what can be done

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Malawi is heading towards a severe food crisis later this year. Drought brought on by the [El Niño](#) weather pattern has affected the harvest of maize, the staple food grown by [nine out of 10](#) farming households in the country.

The government declared a [state of disaster](#) in March as the country entered its dry season with very low food stocks. Malawi consumes around 3.5 million tons of [maize](#) every year, but only 2.9 million tons will be harvested according to government estimates—a shortfall of 600,000 tons.

On 30 April President Lazarus Chakwera said the country needed [US\\$447 million](#) in aid to import food, boost dry season production, and future-proof Malawi against the next drought. The government is unlikely to be able to raise the entire amount.

We, and our collaborators listed below, analyze [food systems](#) and agricultural policies in Malawi. We believe that [the only way to ensure that Malawians have enough food to eat this year is to import it.](#)

Building a food system that can withstand future droughts is the most important objective, but one that cannot be achieved in time to prevent hunger this year. This leaves the country with two options: importing food, or growing food during the ongoing [dry season](#). In this article, we argue that imports are the only realistic way to [ensure that Malawians have enough food to eat](#) before the next main harvest.

The next rains are only expected towards the end of 2024, for a harvest around April 2025. This means that, as in past El Niño affected years, [up to 40% of the population](#) are likely to need food assistance.

For a [cash-strapped country which imports more than it exports](#), growing food in the dry winter season is a more attractive proposition than [using scarce foreign exchange](#) to buy it. The government believes that if it enables farmers to grow crops this winter, they will be able to produce enough maize to make up for this year's lost harvest. This is a very risky strategy. It relies on three assumptions, none of which are realistic.

It is too late for winter cropping

First, growing crops in winter without irrigation can only happen if the soil has retained enough residual moisture from the rainy season. The Malawi government says that, if it buys US\$45.2 million worth of maize seed and chemical fertilizer for [smallholder farmers](#) who have access to land in shallow wetlands ([dambos](#)) and on riverbanks, these farmers will be able to grow 210,000 tons of maize this winter—over one third of the total amount needed.

But this is not possible after a drought. Even in a year where enough rain falls in the wet summer season, maize that relies on [residual moisture cultivation](#) must be planted before June. This year the soils are too dry across most of Malawi. Only the less thirsty crops such as [sweet potatoes](#) are still being grown with residual moisture. But this is [standard practice](#) in Malawi, so there is little room for expanding their cultivation.

Second, the appeal assumes that massive amounts of maize will be grown under irrigation. The government plans to supply US\$25.5 million in seeds and fertilizer to middle scale farmers and institutions like the Malawi Defense Force and [Greenbelt Authority Mega Farms](#) to grow 218,000 tons of maize (just over one third of the maize needed) using existing irrigation schemes. The government also wants to contract big commercial farms to grow 100,000 tons of maize for purchase by the [National Food Reserve Agency](#) at a cost of US\$48.5 million.

This would come at a large opportunity cost, because the irrigation equipment that is in working order is already being used to grow other crops (often for export).

Third, the government has said that it will repair almost 5,800 hectares of dilapidated irrigation schemes and newly irrigate 12,800 hectares of land. It will spend US\$31.3 million doing this, and says this could produce enough maize to make up about 15% of the shortfall.

This is the type of investment that, if done right, would increase agricultural production capacity for years to come. But repairing irrigation equipment takes months and constructing new irrigation schemes takes years. It will not help prevent hunger this year and cannot be an emergency response.

Food imports are necessary

This leaves only one viable means to ensure that Malawians do not go hungry this year: food imports. We have [argued before](#) that food should be imported as soon as it becomes clear that Malawi will not be able to harvest enough crops.

This should be done before [food prices](#) start rising (as they typically do after each main harvest) and before the country faces stiff competition on regional markets from Zambia and Zimbabwe, which also have a maize shortage this year.

Donor support is crucial

Unfortunately, the government does not have the resources to import the grain that will be needed, so donors will have to step in if hunger is to be averted. But they might be hesitant to foot the bill because they worry

that a short-term humanitarian response could negatively affect long-term investment in food system resilience by competing for limited resources and diminishing the urgency of seeking a lasting solution.

However, this is not the right time for a conversation about how Malawi can better face future disasters or whether aid stymies the reforms needed to improve the country's resilience. Failing to import food would have dire consequences.

In a normal year, [hunger costs Malawi over 10% of GDP](#) in lost productivity, poor health, and missed school days. Without humanitarian aid, the losses will be worse this year. Impoverished people whose [resilience has already been deeply eroded](#) will pay for survival by depleted assets (having to sell off the few that they have to buy food), deteriorated health, and compromised education, reversing years of economic development. Children in particular are likely to suffer life-long losses in cognitive and physical ability when exposed to hunger.

This should not be allowed. We ought to first face the looming crisis, learn from it, and then make the necessary reforms and long-term investments—not the other way around.

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