



MONITORING FOOD SYSTEMS in Malawi

KEY MESSAGES

- Malawi has made notable progress in advancing food systems transformation through the development of its Food Systems National Pathway and associated investment frameworks. However, implementation remains constrained by weak monitoring, evaluation, and accountability systems, which limit effective tracking of progress.
- Malawi's food system remains poorly diversified and highly vulnerable to recurring shocks, including food price volatility and increasing climate-related stresses. These shocks continue to undermine nutrition outcomes and threaten the long-term sustainability of the food system.
- Although multiple sectoral data systems exist such as the Integrated Household Survey (IHS), Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), and various administrative datasets, their potential is undermined by fragmentation and weak integration. Limited harmonisation and poor alignment with planning and budgeting processes, particularly at the district level, reduce their usefulness for decision-making.
- Advancing food systems transformation in Malawi will require the development of an integrated and costed monitoring and evaluation framework that strengthens linkages among indicators, planning, financing, and accountability systems across both national and subnational levels.

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Food Systems
Countdown
Initiative



gain
Global Alliance for
Improved Nutrition



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
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Introduction

Malawi articulated its food systems vision through the Malawi Food Systems National Pathways Report, which was developed following national dialogues and presented at the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit. Both the pathway and the dialogues were structured around the five Action Tracks of the Summit and were supported by the Food Systems Transformative Integrated Policy (FS-TIP) Initiative, which aims to build consensus around key food system priorities.

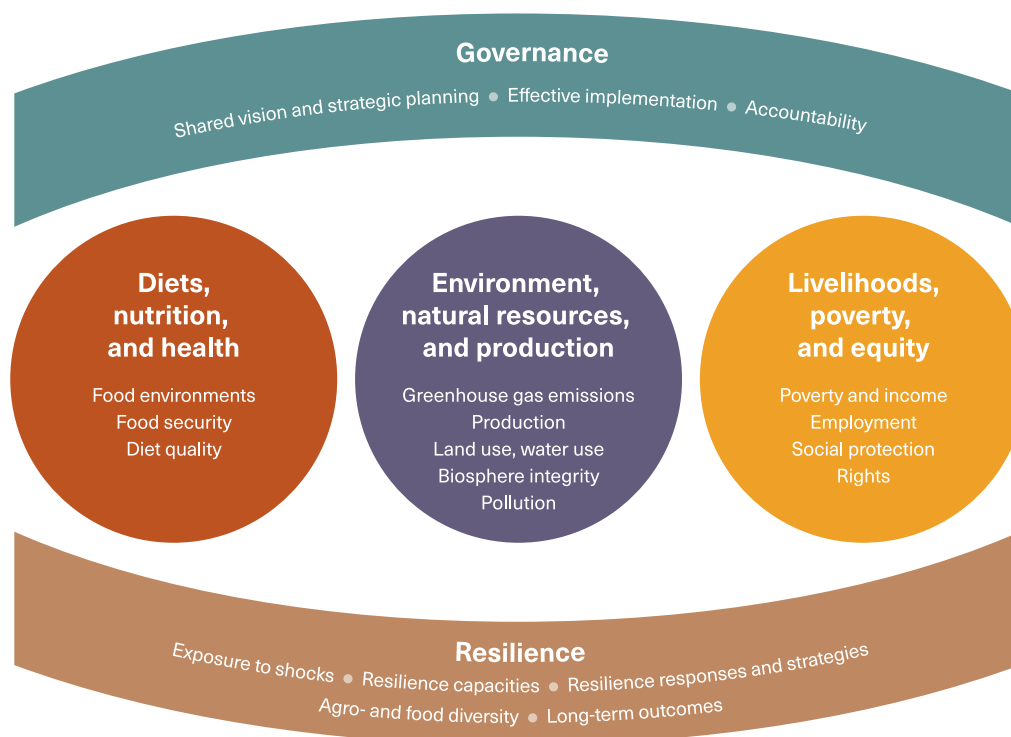
Malawi's food system remains largely undiversified, with approximately 70% of dietary energy derived predominantly from cereals and, to a much lesser extent, roots and tubers ¹. This pattern reflects a longstanding overreliance on maize and an inadequate consumption of other food groups ². An estimated 92% of the population cannot afford a healthy diet ^{3,4}, while 71% are unable to access a nutrient-adequate diet. Consequently, most households depend on cheaper, energy-dense staples, primarily maize, that provide satiety but lack essential micronutrients. In 2022, maize accounted for 42.3% of agricultural water

use yet contributed only 20.9% to agricultural GDP ⁵. As agriculture is predominantly rainfed in Malawi, the high water use attributed to maize largely reflects the extent of land allocated to its production, underscoring a persistent trade-off between food security objectives and environmental sustainability.

Nutrition indicators have remained unacceptably poor over the past decade ⁶. The Malawi Demographic and Health Survey⁷ indicates that stunting increased slightly from 37% in 2015/16 to 38% in 2024. During the same period, underweight prevalence declined from 12% to 10%, and wasting decreased from 3% to 2%, while overweight rose from 5% to 6%. Despite these mixed trends, micronutrient deficiencies remain widespread ⁸, highlighting persistent challenges in improving overall dietary quality and nutritional outcomes.

Historically, Malawi's relatively high population density, compared to much of southern Africa, reflects unfavourable climate and soil conditions for crop production. Agriculture has long been vulnerable to periodic droughts and floods, climate change is

Countdown themes and indicator groups. Outer shapes refer to cross-cutting themes. Interior circles refer to long-term outcomes.



- 1 Kimani, E., Glatzel, K., Thangata, P., Mitchell, C., Ulimwengu, J., Milani, P., Le Page, L. (2021). FS-TIP Malawi Food System Diagnostic and Landscaping Analysis.
- 2 Cockx, L., De Weerd, J., Duchoslav, J., and Nagoli, J. (2026). Mindset or economics: What explains the dominance of maize in Malawi. MaSSP Policy Note 55. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/181792>
- 3 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2023. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum*. Rome, FAO.
- 4 Caruso, German Daniel; Cardona Sosa, Lina Marcela. Malawi Poverty Assessment : *Poverty Persistence in Malawi—Climate Shocks, Low Agricultural Productivity, and Slow Structural Transformation (English)*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099920006302215250>
- 5 Diao, X., De Weerd, J., Fang, P., Jones, E., Nagoli, J., et al. (2025). Malawi's agrifood system: Transformation and environmental impacts. IFPRI Working Paper. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/178668>
- 6 Trijsburg, L., Ulimwengu, J. M., Magne-Domgho, L. (2021). FS-TIP Brief Malawi—Food Systems Transformative Integrated Policy: Diets, Nutrition and Health outcomes.
- 7 National Statistics Office (2024). Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2024 Key Indicators Report, Zomba, Malawi.
- 8 Global Nutrition Report. 2022 Global Nutrition Report: Stronger commitments for greater action. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives, 2022

increasing both the frequency and severity of these shocks. Malawi's climate is increasingly characterized by erratic rainfall patterns, recurrent droughts, and periodic flooding. Climate projections suggest temperature increases of 1.5°C to 2.5°C by 2050, alongside higher rainfall variability and more frequent extreme weather events. These changes pose significant risks to agricultural productivity and will intensify pest and disease pressures; this will likely contribute to disruptions in food availability and stability⁹.

Existing government strategies, including the National Multisector Nutrition Strategic Plan (2025-2030), the National Agricultural Sector-Wide Approach (ASWAp), and Malawi 2063 First 10-Year Implementation Plan (MIP-1) identify priority value chains, such as legumes and oilseeds, fruits and livestock (including fisheries). These value chains are recognized for their potential to transform Malawi's food system by strengthening climate resilience, expanding economic opportunities, improving nutrition outcomes, generating employment, and enhancing export competitiveness.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief examines the current status of food systems monitoring mechanisms in Malawi and describes how the Food Systems Countdown Initiative global indicator framework has been adapted at the national level. It identifies key indicators and critical data gaps and puts forward recommendations to strengthen governance, improve policy coherence, and support the development of a comprehensive national food systems monitoring architecture.

The Food Systems Countdown Initiative

The Countdown emerged from the United Nations Food Systems Summit as an interdisciplinary collaboration that brings together more than 65 food systems experts from a wide range of global institutions. The Initiative has developed a comprehensive global monitoring framework organized around five thematic pillars: (1) Diets, nutrition, and health; (2) Environment, natural resources, and production; (3) Livelihoods, poverty, and equity; (4) Governance; and (5) Resilience. Through annual reports and complementary analytical products, the Countdown tracks progress toward global food systems transformation.

To enhance relevance and usability, the Countdown's global indicator framework is being adapted at the country level to reflect national contexts, priorities, and data realities. Malawi was among the first countries to undertake this process, through a collaboration between the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, implementing agency for the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development.

Prioritised Indicators

Effective food systems monitoring requires a concise and practical set of indicators that are both nationally relevant and internationally comparable. Building on the Food Systems Countdown Initiative's global framework, a workshop was held in Lilongwe, Malawi, in February 2026 to develop a multidimensional framework for tracking the country's progress toward a more sustainable, equitable, and nutritious food system.

This workshop brought together stakeholders from government, UN agencies, academia, development partners, and civil society in a participatory process. Through prioritisation and deliberation, 60 indicators were proposed, based on six key criteria to ensure they are both feasible and useful for policy and programming purposes.

Within the **Diets, nutrition and health** thematic area, indicators on dietary diversity, food affordability, infant and young child feeding practices, food insecurity experience, access to safe water and sanitation, and school feeding coverage were proposed, as they cover both the supply and demand-side constraints and the public service delivery conditions that shape nutritional outcomes. During stakeholder consultations, emerging indicators related to unhealthy dietary practices and the prevalence of non-communicable diseases were also proposed. Collectively, the selected indicators enable tracking of progress across the full nutrition continuum, from acute food insecurity to diet quality and diet-related disease, at both national and district levels.

Stakeholders in **Environment, natural resources and production** offered several indicators related to agricultural productivity across key commodities, alongside indicators on water-use efficiency, soil health, post-harvest losses, deforestation, biodiversity, fisheries output, and greenhouse gas emissions from the food system. The inclusion of trade performance and agro-processing indicators reflects the strategic emphasis on value addition and export diversification outlined in current government investment plans. Taken together, these indicators provide an integrated assessment of whether gains in food production are being achieved sustainably, capturing not only changes in output but also the conditions and stewardship of the land, water, and other natural resources in which future food production depends.

Indicators covering **Livelihoods, poverty and equity** included income poverty, multidimensional deprivation, access to land and tenure security, credit availability, market participation, and social protection coverage. Equity considerations are explicitly incorporated through indicators on women's and youth participation in agriculture and the prevalence of child labor in farming, recognizing that meaningful food system transformation requires addressing the unequal constraints faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups. An additional

9 Matchaya, Greenwell Collins; and Guthiga, Paul. 2023. Food system diagnostics and policy implications: The Malawi case. In *African Food Systems Transformation and the Post-Malabo Agenda*, eds. John M. Ulimwengu, Ebenezer M. Kwofie, and Julia Collins. Chapter 3, Pp. 36-53.

indicator on livelihood diversification captures households' capacity to absorb agricultural shocks without falling into food insecurity.

Stakeholders in the **Governance** thematic area proposed indicators that track implementation providing accountability and coordination in food systems transformation. Indicators on domestic financing, civil society participation, approval of district-level implementation plans, and food safety compliance inspections capture the depth, inclusivity, and functionality of food systems governance. An indicator on programs supporting food systems transformation further reflects transformation including the coordination, management, and implementation of food systems initiatives. Together, these metrics are essential for assessing whether Malawi's food systems transformation is institutionally grounded and accountable to the populations it is intended to serve.

Indicators under the **Resilience** thematic area track exposure to shocks and the severity of household coping strategies, food price and supply variability, adoption of climate-smart and improved agricultural technologies, access to extension services, irrigation coverage, crop diversification, livelihood diversification, and market integration. Together, these indicators capture both the stresses to which the food system is exposed and its capacity to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to shocks. Monitoring resilience indicators over time can strengthen early warning functions and support more evidence-based targeting of social protection, risk management, and climate adaptation investments toward the most vulnerable populations and geographies.

A key insight emerging from the stakeholder workshop on food system indicators was the strong interconnectedness across thematic domains. Resilience is closely linked with environmental sustainability, natural resource management, production systems, and livelihoods, poverty, and equity outcomes. In Malawi's food system, progress in one domain is contingent on advances in others, underscoring that durable food system transformation cannot be achieved by addressing individual thematic areas in isolation, but rather through coordinated and integrated interventions across the system.

Data Availability and Gaps

Both the Malawi Food Systems Pathway and the Malawi Food Systems Strategy and Investment Plan currently lack formal monitoring frameworks. The absence of an effective monitoring and evaluation system, combined with persistent challenges in data collection, sharing, and utilisation, continues to hinder their implementation. Although data management and information systems exist in certain sectors, they are not consistently updated or integrated. Platforms such as the IHS and IPC assessments have improved data availability, yet their integration into formal planning and alignment to food system remains inadequate. The adapted Malawi Food

Systems Indicator Compendium therefore represents an important first step toward establishing a robust framework for tracking food system transformation.

Specifically, indicators on access to safe drinking water (limited water quality testing), domestic financing for food systems transformation (uncaptured off-budget flows), food systems implementation plans at district level (inconsistent reporting), agriculture's share of GDP (weak coverage of informal activity), and food system emissions (limited carbon accounting capacity) are critical additions to the food system indicators whose data collection and management need to be strengthened.

Accountability within Malawi's food system governance is further constrained by inconsistent stakeholder engagement and weak feedback mechanisms. While government, civil society organisations and farmer groups are active in advocacy, private sector participation in food systems dialogue and investment remains limited due to policy unpredictability and limited incentives. Engagement processes are often ad hoc and lack continuity, reducing opportunities for inclusive and coordinated decision-making. Weak monitoring and feedback systems make it difficult to track progress and translate commitments into measurable outcomes.

Recommendations for Strengthening Monitoring-Policy Linkages

1. Establish a National Food Systems

Monitoring Platform: Building on the newly established National Steering Committee on Food Systems Transformation, Malawi should develop a government-led, cross-sectoral food systems coordination platform to oversee monitoring and accountability. The platform would consolidate core food systems indicators, promote harmonisation across sectors, and produce annual food systems performance reports aligned with national planning, budgeting, and policy review cycles.

2. Strengthen Subnational Monitoring Systems:

District-level monitoring should be strengthened by improving statistical and analytical capacity, standardising reporting tools, and upgrading digital data systems. This will enable timely, consistent, and comparable tracking of food systems' outcomes across national and subnational levels.

3. Improve Data Integration and Accessibility:

Clear data-sharing protocols should be established among government ministries, research institutions, and development partners to improve data integration, accessibility, and use. Enhanced coordination will support evidence-based decision-making and reduce duplication across food systems data initiatives.