Malawi

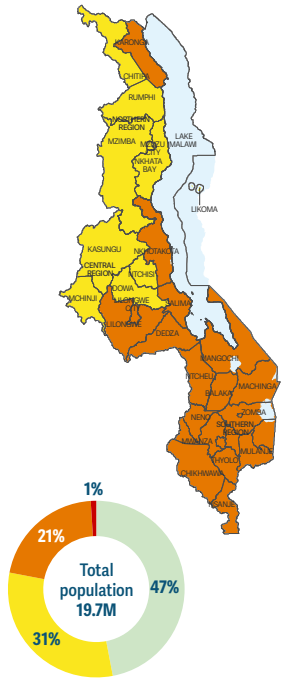
ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY | Sharply increasing levels of acute food insecurity driven by climate-related shocks, economic decline and high food prices in both rural and urban areas.

PEAK 2023/24 (OCTOBER 2023–MARCH 2024)

4.4M people or 22% of the total population faced high levels of acute food insecurity in the lean season. This includes 0.3M people in Emergency (IPC Phase 4).

This is the highest number in the last six years of GRFC reporting, around 0.6 million more people than during the previous peak in October 2022–March 2023. This reflects the impact of low cereal production due to cyclone damage in southern areas combined with high prices of staple foods constraining households' economic access to food. A majority of people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) live in rural areas but around 0.5 million of them reside in the cities of Blantyre, Zomba, Lilongwe and Mzuzu, with all except Lilongwe classified in IPC Phase 3.

Source: Malawi IPC TWG, August 2023.



DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS 2023–2024

Weather extremes In March 2023, tropical cyclone Freddy brought strong winds, flooding and landslides to 15 districts in southern Malawi, leading to crop losses, disrupting livelihoods, damaging critical infrastructure and displacing 650 000 people right after the cyclone (UNHCR, June 2023). Although many of them returned, 0.2 million people remained displaced by April 2023. The impacts of the cyclone decreased food availability, increased prices and limited access to food (IPC, August 2023).

The cyclone's damage to irrigation infrastructure, particularly in Chikwawa and Phalombe, could have a negative impact on 2024 production (FAO-GIEWS, September 2023), particularly considering that the prevailing El Niño event is expected to bring drier-than-normal weather conditions until June 2024 (FAO-GIEWS, September 2023). The likely delayed onset of rains due to El Niño could reduce agricultural income-earning opportunities for poor households who rely on daily labour during the lean season to purchase food.

Overall, the 2024 maize harvest is expected to be below average due to the combined impacts of cyclones, the forecasted below-average and delayed rains, and limited access to agricultural inputs (FEWS NET, September 2023).

Economic shocks The devaluation and depreciation of the local currency drove up the import prices of fuel, fertilizers, pesticides and other agricultural inputs, thereby increasing the cost of producing and transporting food in the main cereal-producing Central and Northern regions.

Coupled with the low national maize harvest in 2023, these factors had a rebound effect on staple food prices, making it increasingly challenging for households with limited financial resources to purchase enough food to meet their dietary needs (IPC, August 2023).

The national average retail price of maize reached new record highs in October and was nearly double that of a year earlier (FAO, November 2023). However, the price growth was decelerating by the latter half of 2023, reflecting the offloading of maize stocks by farmers to generate cash to purchase agricultural inputs and an uptick in imports from neighbouring countries that somewhat eased market supply pressure (FAO, November 2023).

DISPLACEMENT

0.7M forcibly displaced people by 2023

0.7M IDPs

Source: IOM, April 2023.

0.05M refugees and asylum-seekers

Source: UNHCR.

ACUTE MALNUTRITION

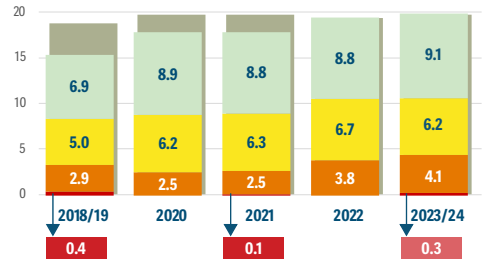
In May 2023, UNICEF warned that at least 573 000 children under 5 years old were at risk of suffering from malnutrition due to acute food insecurity – compounded by recurrent climate shocks, preventable disease outbreaks, economic instability and chronic underfunding in the social sectors. The agency alerted that, in 2023 alone, over 62 000 children under 5 years old were at risk of SAM (UNICEF, May 2023).

DRIVERS OF ACUTE MALNUTRITION 2023–2024

Inadequate services Inadequate access to safe WASH facilities was compounded by the damage inflicted by tropical cyclone Freddy, which left many people with limited access to safe drinking water. This exacerbated one of the worst cholera outbreaks in a decade, leading to the highest number of cholera cases in an African country for 2023 as reported by WHO. Nearly 59 000 cases were reported between the start of the outbreak in March 2022 and August 2023 (WHO, September 2023).

Inadequate practices The latest available data reported Extremely Critical levels of Minimum Acceptable Diet among children aged 6–23 months. Around 64 percent of children under 6 months were exclusively breastfed, which is considered an Alert level (MICS, 2019–2020). Anaemia levels among pregnant and breastfeeding women were 31.4 percent, considered a moderate public health problem (UNICEF, 2021).

Peak numbers of people (in millions) by phase of acute food insecurity, 2018–2024



Source: Malawi IPC TWG.

A protracted major food crisis Malawi is a low-income country that has been defined as a major food crisis in all eight editions of the GRFC with more than 1 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity each year. The southern districts of Balaka, Chikwawa and Nsanje have consistently been classified in Crisis (IPC Phase 3). Food insecurity is driven by underlying structural problems that have left the country vulnerable to extreme weather events, especially drought and cyclone-induced floods, particularly in the southern region where most rural households (90 percent) depend on rain-fed subsistence farming and income from casual agricultural labour (WFP, 2023).

Numbers of people facing high levels of acute food insecurity have almost doubled since 2020, consistent with trends driven by global shocks including COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. The numbers were lowest in 2019/20 and 2021/22, attributable to good production seasons.