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Climate change, government management pose challenges in agriculture-dependent Malawi

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 210 | Jamy Felton and Hangala Siachiwena

Summary

Agriculture is the mainstay of Malawi's economy, contributing 30% of gross domestic product (GDP) and employing a majority of the country's workforce (World Bank, 2016). Malawi has also been classified as one of Southern Africa's most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change due to its heavy dependence on rain-fed agriculture and susceptibility to floods and droughts (Government of the Republic of Malawi, 2015). Malawian citizens are clearly aware of their vulnerability, consistently ranking "food shortage and famine" as the most important problem that government should address (Hamer & Seekings, 2017). Successive Malawian governments have prioritized interventions aimed at bolstering food security, including the implementation of fertilizer input subsidies targeting smallholder farmers (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014).

The 2017 Afrobarometer survey shows that the effects of climate change have been felt by an overwhelming majority of Malawians. Most citizens say that droughts have become more severe and climate conditions for agricultural production have worsened. More Malawians are going without enough food and without a cash income.

Perhaps in response, popular ratings of the government's performance have declined sharply – not surprising in a country where positive ratings of government performance are correlated with improvements in food security (Ferree & Horowitz, 2010). A majority of citizens don't see the government's fertilizer subsidy program as an adequate answer and prefer that it be scrapped.

Given the centrality of agriculture to Malawi's economy, these survey findings raise concerns about the viability of current agricultural policies and responses to climate change for food security and the economy as a whole.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-5% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

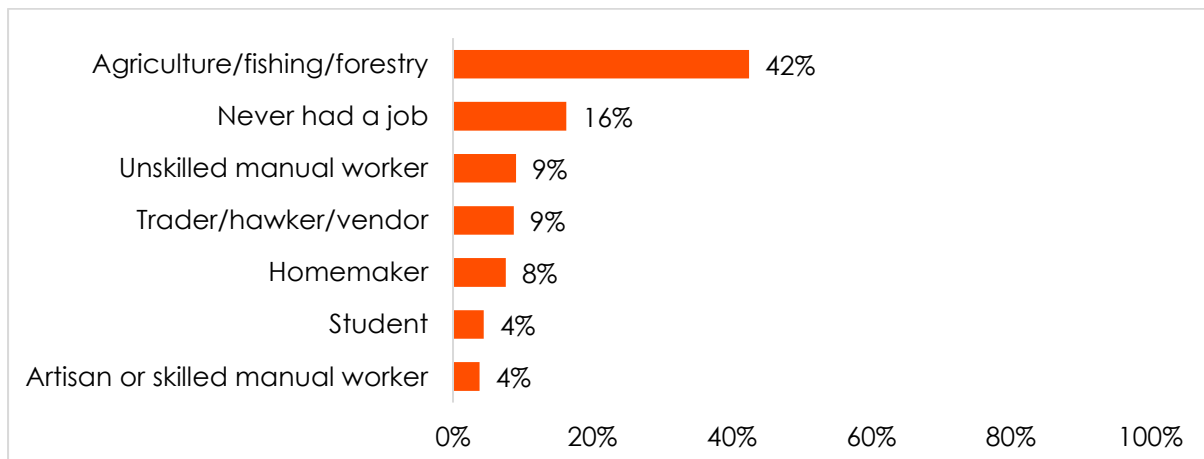
- More than four in 10 Malawians (42%) are dependent on agriculture and related activities such as fishing and forestry for earning an income and daily sustenance.
- More than eight in 10 Malawians say that droughts have become more severe (84%) and that climate conditions for agricultural production have worsened (81%) in their region over the past 10 years.
- More Malawians have been going without enough food and without a cash income in recent years. Six in 10 respondents (60%) say they repeatedly experienced food shortages during the past 12 months.
- Food shortage/famine, management of the economy, and agriculture are the most important problems the government should address, Malawians say.
- Citizen assessments of the government's performance in managing the economy have declined sharply. While two-thirds (66%) said the government was doing "fairly well" or "very well" in 2008, only 14% say so now.
- A majority (54%) of respondents say the government's fertilizer and input subsidy program has failed to help poor Malawians and should be scrapped.

Malawian dependence on the agricultural sector

Malawians are highly reliant on agriculture for earning an income and daily sustenance. More than four in 10 (42%) say their main occupation is in agriculture, fishing, or forestry. This is the largest employment category, followed by unskilled manual workers (9%) and traders/hawkers/vendors (9%) (Figure 1). Agriculture maintains its central role despite a decline of 7 percentage points since the previous Afrobarometer survey in 2014 in the proportion of respondents who identify their main occupation as being in agriculture/fishing/forestry (Figure 2).

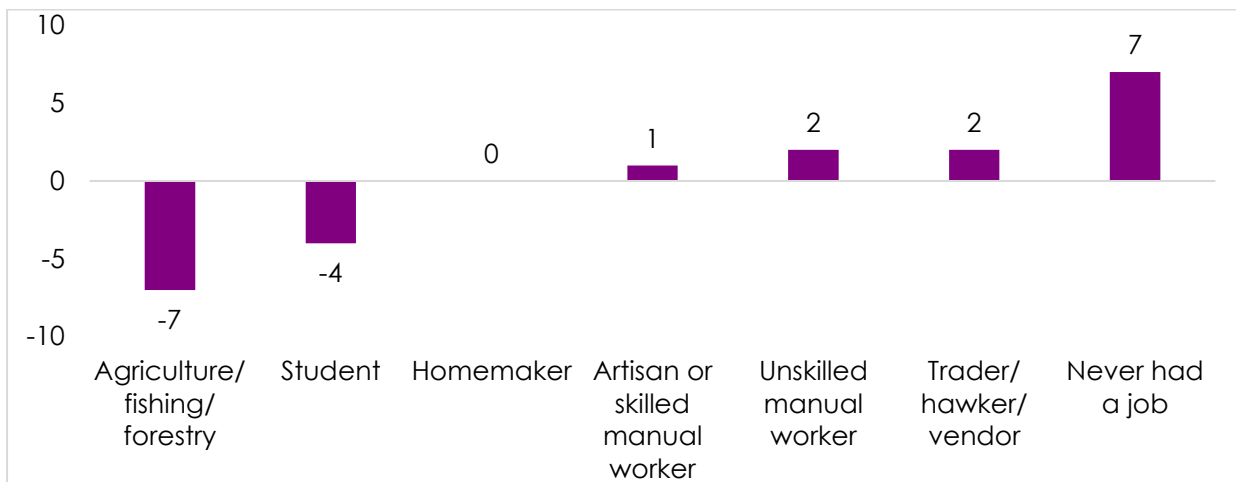
The overwhelming majority (92%) of people working in the agricultural sector are self-employed, similar to traders/hawkers/vendors (96%) (Figure 3). This indicates a high level of self-reliance by Malawians in order to keep their businesses alive and families fed.

Figure 1: Employment | Malawi | 2017



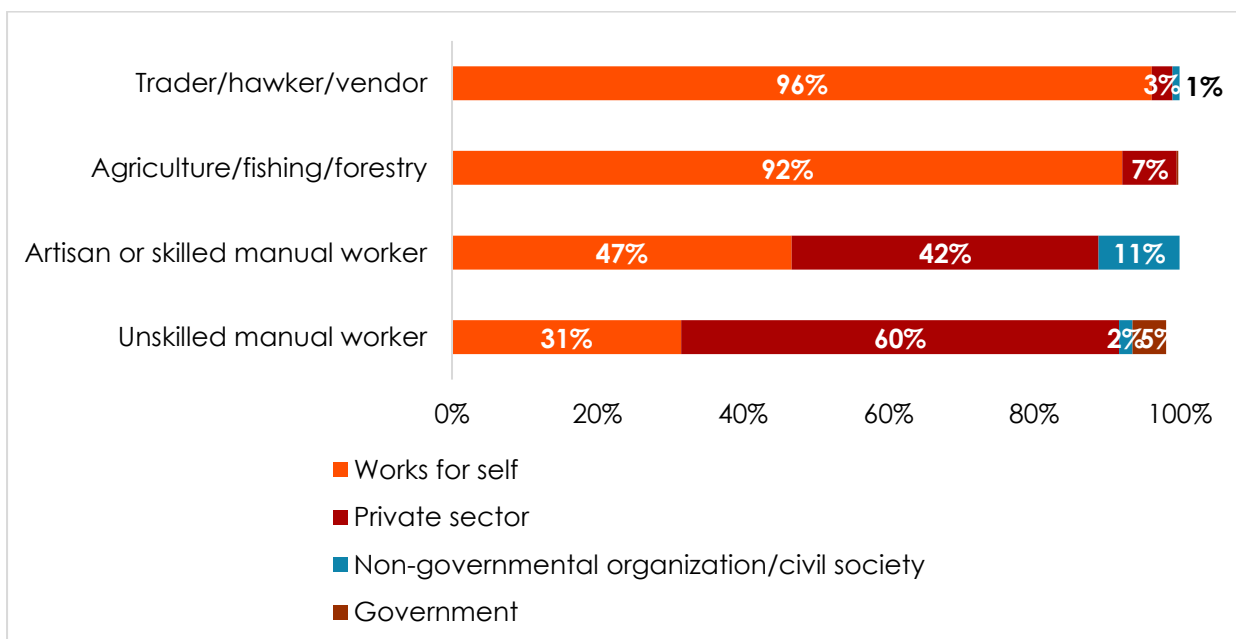
Respondents were asked: What is your main occupation? [If unemployed, retired, or disabled:] What was your last main occupation?

Figure 2: Change in employment | Malawi | 2014-2017



Respondents were asked: What is your main occupation? [If unemployed, retired, or disabled:] What was your last main occupation? (Figure shows change, in percentage points, between 2014 and 2017.)

Figure 3: Employer | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: Do you work for yourself, for someone else in the private sector or the non-governmental sector, or for government?

Looking at the socio-demographic profile of people who are employed in the agricultural sector (Figure 4), they are concentrated in the Central (51%) and Southern (40%) regions, and of course most of them live in rural areas (96%). Most have “some primary schooling” (51%). Men (51%) and women (49%) are about equally represented.

Two-thirds (66%), of those who work in agriculture identify themselves as the head of their households, indicating a high degree of reliance on the success of the agricultural industry for household survival.

Figure 4: Demographics of Malawians involved in agriculture | Malawi | 2017

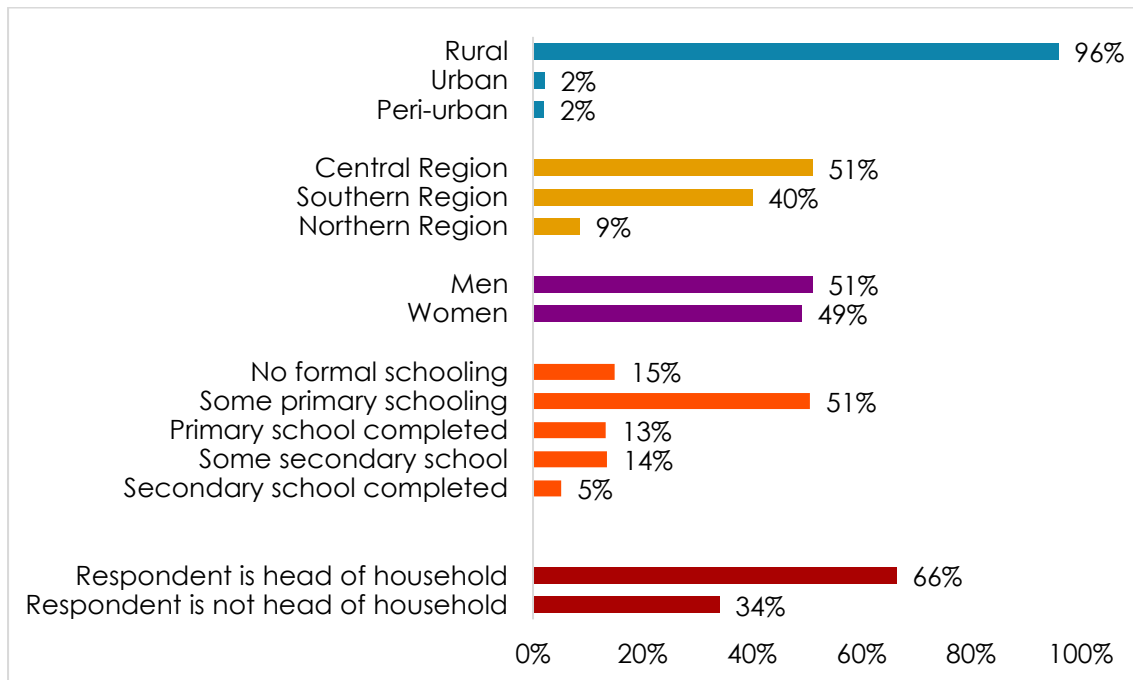
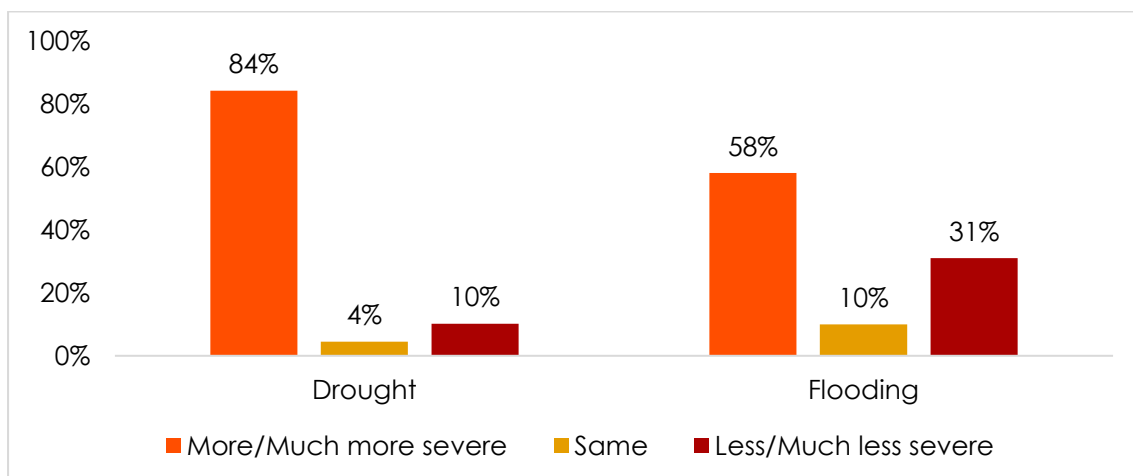


Figure shows % of agriculture/fishing/forestry employees who fall into each socio-demographic group. Respondents who do not work in agriculture/fishing/forestry are excluded.

Challenges to the agricultural sector

In 2015-2016, Malawi experienced large-scale flooding as well as a crippling drought (World Bank, 2017). When asked about changes in climate conditions in their region over the past 10 years, 84% of survey respondents say that droughts have become more severe, including 66% who say they have become “much more severe.” A majority (58%) also say that flooding has worsened (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Severity of drought and flooding in surrounding area | Malawi | 2017

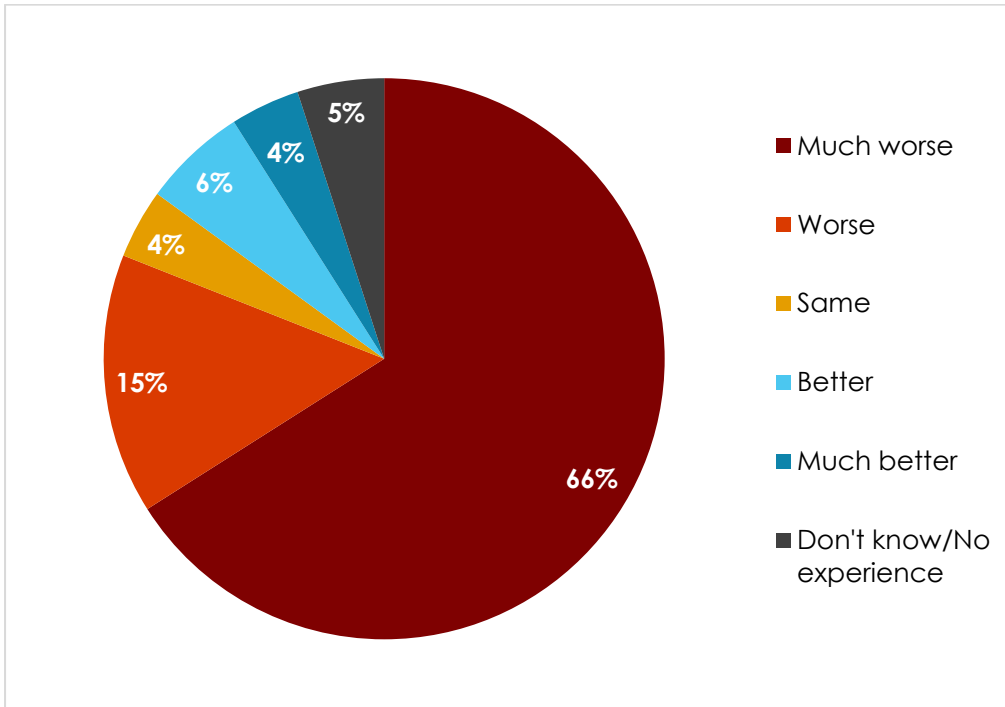


Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

- Droughts?
- Flooding?

Overall, eight in 10 Malawians (81%) say that climate conditions for agricultural production have gotten worse in the area where they live, including 66% who describe them as “much worse” (Figure 6). For a country so reliant on agriculture, this is not good news.

Figure 6: Change in climate conditions for agricultural production | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your experience, would you say climate conditions for agricultural production in your area have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same over the last 10 years, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Knock-on effects of trouble in the agricultural sector

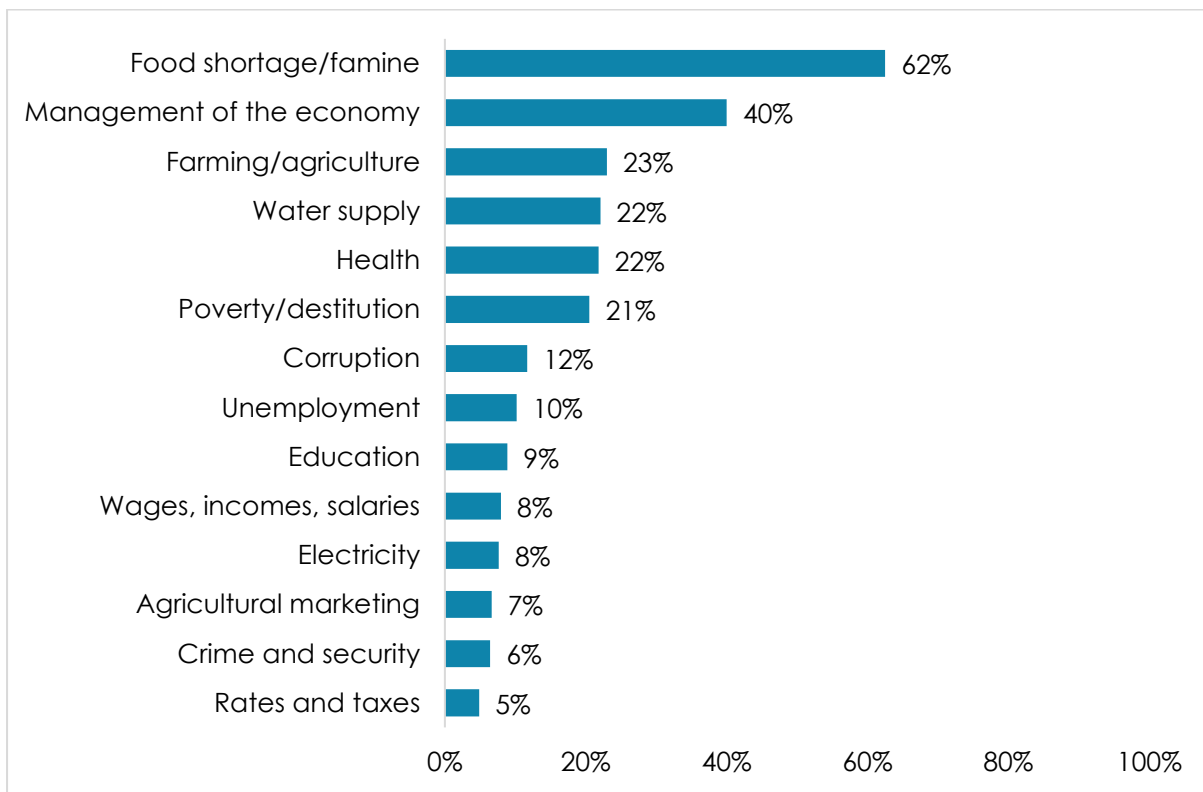
According to a World Bank (2017) analysis, climate change has already contributed to food insecurity in Malawi. When citizens are asked what they consider the most important national problems that the government should address, the most frequent response is food shortage/famine (cited by 62% of respondents as one of their three priority problems).

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Management of the economy is a distant second (40%), followed by farming/agriculture (23%) (Figure 7). In Malawi, each of these problems is, of course, closely tied to the agricultural sector.

One very real reason why Malawians rank food shortages as a top-priority problem is that a majority of them repeatedly go without enough to eat. Six in 10 respondents (60%) say they went without enough food “several times,” “many times,” or “always” during the previous 12 months. While the proportion who suffered repeated food shortages decreased between 2005 and 2012, it has been slowly increasing again in the 2014 and 2017 surveys (Table 1). In addition, 80% say they went without a cash income at least “several times.”

Figure 7: Most important problems that need government attention | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondents were recorded. Figure shows the percentage of respondents who cited each problem among their three priorities.)

Table 1: Going without enough food and a cash income | Malawi | 2005-2017

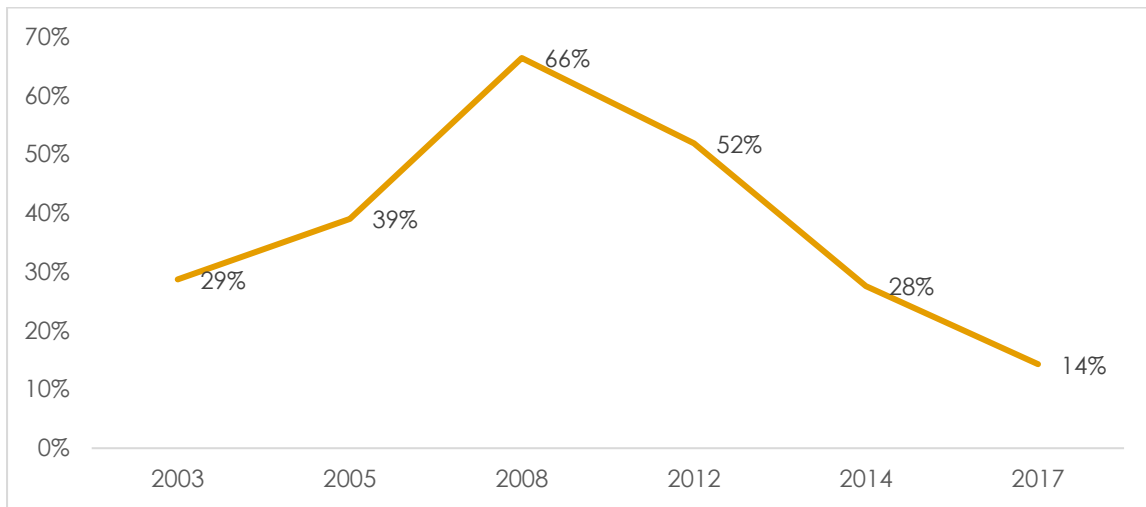
	2005	2008	2012	2014	2017
Went without enough food several times/many times/always	72%	60%	47%	56%	60%
Went without a cash income several times/many times/always	85%	82%	69%	83%	80%

Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without a cash income? (% who said “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

Policy responses

In its Malawi Economic Monitor, the World Bank (2017) argues for better macro-economic management and fiscal planning to address food insecurity. According to everyday Malawians, the government is not doing a very good job so far. Between 2003 and 2008, the number of survey respondents who said the government was doing “fairly well” or “very well” at handling the economy increased, reaching a peak of 66%. Since then, however, popular assessments of the government’s economic management have dropped drastically: In 2017, only one in seven citizens (14%) think the government is doing fairly/very well (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Government performance in managing the economy | Malawi | 2005-2017

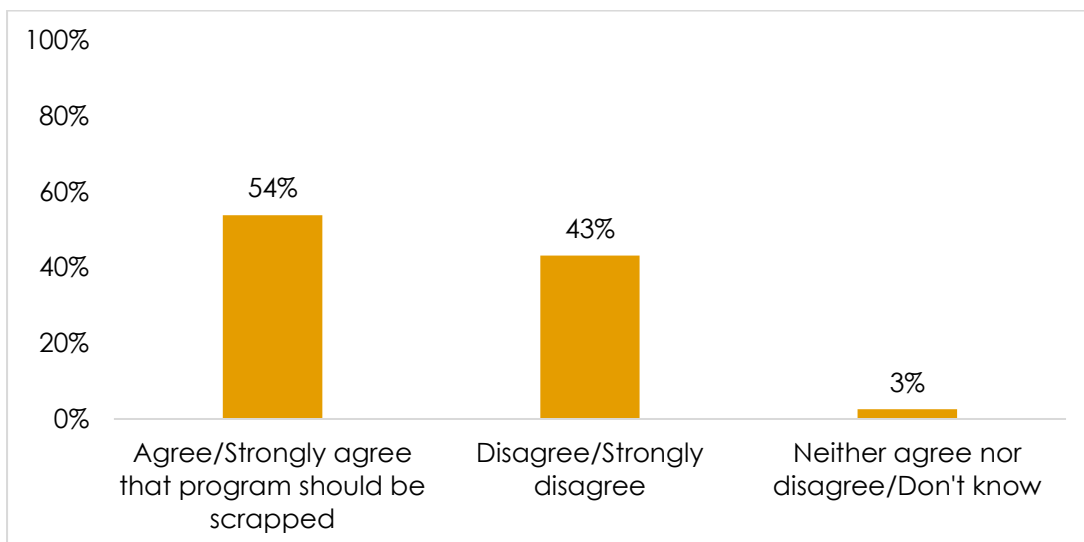


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the economy? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

One prominent policy response to Malawi's food-security challenges is the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), which since 2005 has provided smallholder farmers with highly subsidized fertilizer and seeds using a voucher system (Chirwa & Chinsinga, 2013). As a result of the extensive use of fertilizers coupled with good rains, Malawi recorded a historic surplus in its maize harvest in 2006 and 2007, averting food shortages and exporting grain to neighbouring countries (Ferree & Horowitz, 2010). In more recent years, drought and flooding have affected food production and resulted in widespread food insecurity (Government of the Republic of Malawi, 2015).

While the input subsidy program was meant to help the poor, 54% of Malawians say it has failed to do so and should be scrapped, and only 43% want to see it continued (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Should fertilizer subsidies be scrapped? | Malawi | 2017

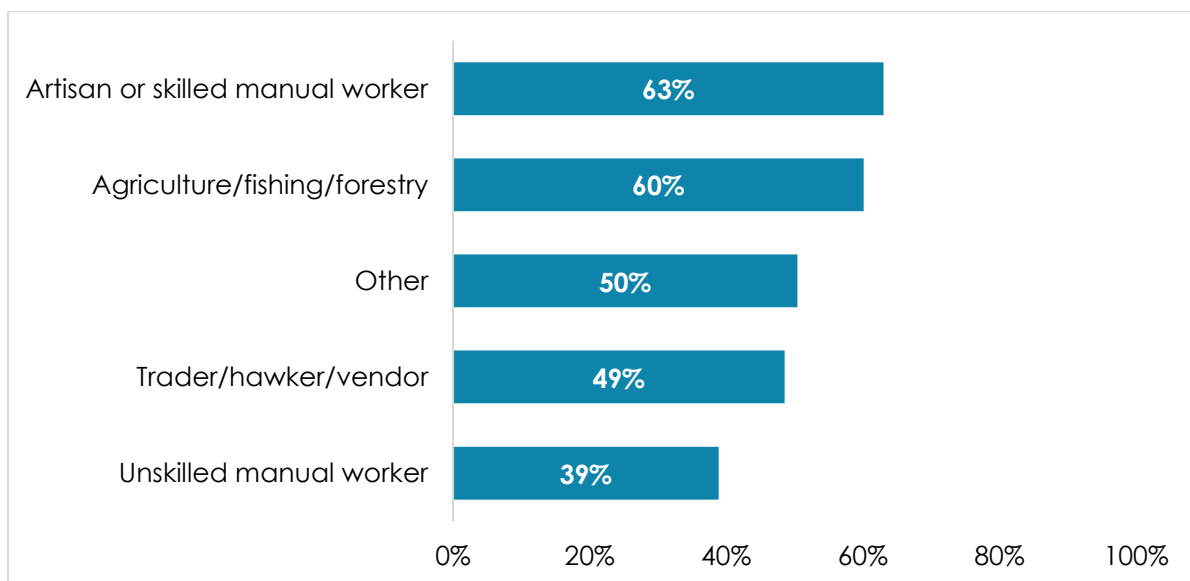


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The fertilizer and inputs subsidy program has failed to help poor Malawians and should be scrapped?

It may be tempting to assume that Malawians who are not affected by these subsidies (i.e. those not in the field of agriculture) are the ones who want it eliminated, but in fact 60% of those working in agriculture/fishing/forestry say the subsidies should be scrapped (Figure 10).

Two factors may help explain this surprising response. First, FISP started as a program targeting the poorest smallholder farmers, but in recent years, there have been reports that the distribution of vouchers has been manipulated to favour farmers in politically strategic districts at the expense of the poorest farmers (Andrews, 2014). So it's possible that farmers would support scrapping fertilizer subsidies if they believed they were wrongly going to undeserving beneficiaries. Second, adverse weather conditions that have hurt agricultural production may have convinced many smallholder farmers that the input program is insufficient to "help poor Malawians."

Figure 10: Fertilizer subsidies should be scrapped | by employment | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The fertilizer and inputs subsidy program has failed to help poor Malawians and should be scrapped? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Conclusion

Malawi's dependence on agriculture has remained high despite recent shocks to the sector, including drought and flooding that have contributed to food insecurity. Citizens rank food insecurity as their country's most urgent problem and express extremely high levels of dissatisfaction with the government's management of the economy.

While the government's fertilizer subsidy program was credited with helping boost agricultural production a decade ago, a majority of Malawians – even a majority of farmers – now favour ending the program.

These findings should prompt the government to fast-track policy responses that reduce Malawi's dependence on rain-fed agriculture. Such policies must take into account the severity of climate change and the limits of fertilizer subsidies during seasons characterized by erratic rainfall. If challenges in agriculture have contributed to an increased incidence of citizens going hungry and without a cash income, policy responses may need to aim at strengthening both agriculture and social protection for the poorest.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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