

Policy Lessons for Localising the Food Systems Transformation Agenda in Malawi

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Key Messages:

- While existing policy frameworks in Malawi demonstrate strong commitment, the biggest challenge has been financing the implementation of the policies and strategies.
- Public expenditures on agri-food systems remain overly focused on maize, undermining nutrition and safety of the diets.
- Essential enablers of food systems transformation—such as irrigation, extension services, research, storage, and infrastructure—remain highly underfunded, limiting resilience and long-term progress.
- Enforcement of food safety and waste management standards has been weak, exposing communities to health risks and hazards.
- Achieving food systems transformation requires greater funding commitments, stronger collaboration, and sustained political commitment.

Introduction

In 2003, African countries adopted the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) as Africa's policy framework for transforming the agricultural sector while addressing broader food system challenges¹. Over the past two decades, CAADP has been embedded into national medium and long-term development plans and priorities of several African member states. However, the implementation of CAADP has faced several challenges.

There has been consensus among policymakers that policies require review and strengthening to address the emerging challenges such as climate change. This consensus for change is evident in commitments made at recent major summits,

including the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in September 2021², the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit in December 2021³, and the African Union Kampala Declaration held in January 2025⁴. The UNFSS emphasises the need to transform our food systems. The Kampala Summit focused on endorsing two key documents, namely a new Ten-Year CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026–2035) and the Kampala Declaration, entitled “Advancing Africa’s Inclusive Agri-food Systems Transformation for Sustainable Economic Growth and Shared Prosperity”. As we look ahead to the next decade of CAADP and the opportunities that lie ahead, it is important to reflect on the policy and regulatory reforms needed to catalyse food systems

transformation in Malawi. The country's food systems transformation pathways include five key areas: (1) Ensuring Safe and Nutritious Food for All, (2) Shifting to Sustainable Consumption Patterns, (3) Boosting Nature-Positive Food Production, (4) Advancing Equitable Livelihoods, and (5) Building Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks, and Stress⁵. This policy brief aims to inform the localisation of global and regional policy frameworks for the transformation of food systems at the country level.

Methodology

This policy brief draws on data and information from two primary sources. Firstly, we conducted a literature review and assessed coherence and alignment of key national frameworks related to food systems transformation, including the Malawi 2063 and its first ten-year implementation plan (MIP-1) covering the period 2021-2030, the National Agriculture Investment Plan (NAIP) 2018 -2023, the National Agriculture Policy (NAP) 2014, the National Multi-Sector Nutrition Policy (MNSNP) 2018-2022 , the Land Act 2018, the Energy Policy 2003, and the National Resilience Strategy 2018-2030. Secondly, we engaged in consultations with various stakeholders. At a central level, consultations were held with the Ministry of Agriculture, and National Planning Commission (NPC), development partners, and the private sector. At a district level, the consultations were carried out with members of District Agriculture Extension Coordinating Committees (DAECC), comprising both government and non-state actors. District consultations were conducted in the three pilot districts (Dedza,

Mzimba, and Chikwawa) for the GIZ Food Systems Transformative Project (2023-2025).

Key findings

Coherence and alignment of agricultural policies

Our review of the various policy frameworks and relevant strategies shows that they are generally aligned and coherent with regional and continental policy frameworks. The Malawi 2063 highlights strategies for enhancing agri-food systems through its various pillars and enablers. It highlights agricultural productivity and commercialisation alongside industrialisation as being essential pillars for transforming the country's food system. Additionally, other policies and strategies, such as the NAP, NAIP, and MNSNP, promote the production of diversified crops and encourage the consumption of nutritious diets to enhance food security and nutrition. These align well with efforts to transform our food systems.

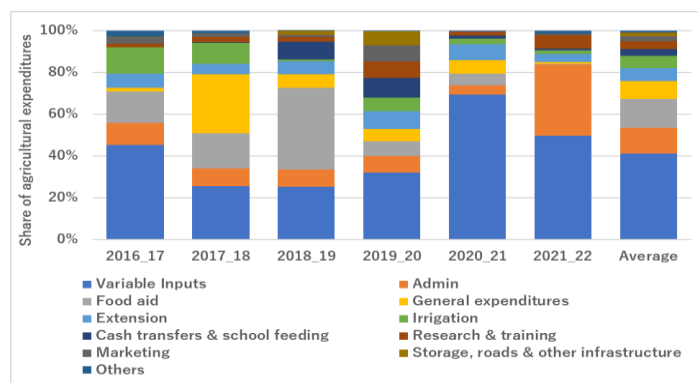
Despite the alignment, significant implementation gaps remain. The Affordable Inputs programme (AIP) continue to prioritise maize production, channelling subsidies for seeds and fertilisers almost exclusively to this crop. This narrow focus undermines efforts to transform and transition towards more sustainable and diversified food systems that can enhance healthy diets. Furthermore, the nutrition component of the MNSNP focuses exclusively on children under five, neglecting other vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and adolescents. Key aspects of food systems- such as food waste management,

retail marketing, and cold storage management- are insufficiently addressed in the policy frameworks.

Overemphasis on supporting maize production

In line with gaps identified above, our review of existing studies and public expenditure data obtained from IFMIS shows that government expenditures have largely emphasised supporting the production of maize, through subsidies on maize seed and fertilisers⁶. On average, between 2016/17 and 2021/22, variable inputs constituted the largest share of 41% total on-budget agricultural expenditure, followed by food aid (12%), which covers maize input subsidies and free maize distribution, respectively. Crucial sectors for agrifood systems transformation were severely underfunded, namely irrigation (6%), extension services (6%), and research and training (4%). A. Despite subsidies taking the largest share, expenditures on food aid and social safety nets (cash transfers and school feeding programmes) remain high, averaging 12% and 3% of total agricultural spending, respectively. These findings suggest the need to re-align agricultural expenditure priorities towards critical drivers of agricultural transformation such as irrigation, poor post-harvest handling and infrastructure, food quality and safety issues and waste management. Specifically, the overemphasis of maize production in agricultural expenditure locks Malawi into a fragile, undiversified, and inefficient food system, undermining progress toward nutrition security, resilience, and sustainable transformation.

Figure 1: Trends of agricultural resource allocation in public expenditures



Source: World Bank

Weak enforcement of food safety and waste management guidelines

Food safety and waste management were highlighted as pressing challenges in the three districts of Mzimba, Dedza, and Chikwawa. The issues are also highlighted in the pathways report. The challenges include weak awareness and understanding of hazards such as aflatoxin; the proliferation and misuse of unauthorised and hazardous chemicals by both agro-dealers and farmers; poor handling (mixing chemicals with food items during transportation); and the absence of enforcement of safety guidelines. This is exacerbated by a crippling lack of enforcement capacity, exemplified by the Malawi Bureau of Standards and district environmental health officers being unable to conduct regular inspections due to resource constraints and high vacancy rates. Waste management was highlighted as another challenge in these districts due to a lack of designated disposal and recycling facilities. This results in unregulated and unsafe disposal of general refuse, livestock carcasses, industrial chemical waste, and

expired foods into rivers. Combined, these challenges (including unsafe production practices, poor handling and transport of food, lack of proper disposal systems, and weak institutional oversight) present serious risks to food safety, human health, and environmental sustainability.

Weak dissemination of policies

While government officers at national and district levels exhibited high awareness of policies such as the National Agriculture Policy, Nutrition Policy, Irrigation Policy, and Land Resource Management Policy, this knowledge rarely reaches frontline staff or farmers, leaving these stakeholders excluded from the intended benefits of these frameworks. Consequently, many frontline staff remain unaware of existing policies, and some key frameworks remain unimplemented or poorly communicated. In addition, there is also a lack of guidelines for implementing policy frameworks. High vacancy rates among extension workers and inadequate resources for awareness campaigns constrain the ability to disseminate the policies in user-friendly formats. It was noted that innovative approaches, including translating the policies into local languages (where possible) and the use of digital tools, could bridge the gap between policy formulation and grassroots implementation.

Limited funding for supporting effective food systems transformation

Stakeholders identified a persistent lack of sustainable funding at district councils as a critical barrier to achieving food systems transformation. It was highlighted that the limited available resources

remain donor-driven, exposing food systems initiatives to the risk of shifting external priorities which undermines sustainability and long-term planning. Furthermore, most of the locally generated resources and revenues at the district councils are channelled back to the Treasury, leaving districts with little flexibility to fund operations. Budgets for recurrent transactions are meagre, making it difficult to maintain facilities or cover essential management costs. Consequently, critical sectors such as extension⁷, fisheries, and irrigation services remain severely paralysed due to a lack of funding.

Constituency Development Funds largely being politically directed toward roads and bridges, leaving other agricultural infrastructure (e.g. livestock, irrigation, and farm mechanisation facilities) underdeveloped. Collectively, these challenges weaken institutional and production capacity and constrain service delivery, thereby fundamentally undermining progress toward building resilient and inclusive food systems.

Lack of meaningful decentralization

Centralised management of district resources—such as land, tractors, and infrastructure, including residential training centres and dip tanks—was identified as one of the challenges limiting the role of district councils in food systems transformation. The district councils currently lack the authority to drive localised action, as the management of these critical resources is not yet devolved to district councils. Furthermore, food systems governance structures and terms of reference for such bodies are not yet developed, leaving a gap in accountability and leadership to effectively

coordinate and implement cohesive inter-ministerial integrated food systems strategies.

Recommendations

Three main recommendations emerge from this policy brief. Firstly, budget allocations should prioritise initiatives that encourage the diversification into nutrient-dense crops and livestock and investments into long-term enablers, including research, extension, irrigation, storage, and infrastructure (e.g., feeder roads, storage, mechanisation, and processing facilities). Secondly, there is a need to strengthen the enforcement capacity of food safety and waste management by increasing funding and staffing for regulatory bodies, establishing designated waste disposal and recycling facilities, and scaling awareness campaigns on hazards. More generally, there is a need to create and fund a clear dissemination strategy that makes the policies available to beneficiaries in user-friendly formats and leverage digital tools and frontline extension workers to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Finally, food systems governance should be strengthened by devolving resource management to district councils, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination, and establishing district-level

governance structures with clear terms of reference for stakeholders.

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This Policy Brief should be cited as:

Gondwe, A., Salonga, D.T., and Chiwaula, L. (2025). Policy and Regulatory Environment: Practical Lessons for Localising Malawi's Food Systems Transformation. Policy Brief No. 41. Lilongwe: MwAPATA Institute. Contact: Anderson Gondwe (Email: a.gondwe@mwapata.mw).

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099061125040030235>



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This research is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The content is the responsibility of study authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

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