

Does accessing multiple social support programmes improve household resilience and food security?

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Key Messages:

- Households face multiple shocks, with nearly at least 67% experiencing between two and ten shocks per year.
- Despite policies limiting multiple programme participation, at least 27% of households accessed multiple social support programmes, with some benefiting from up to four.
- Participation in multiple programmes is associated with higher food consumption scores and greater household resilience.
- Policymakers should consider bundling complementary social support programmes rather than delivering them in isolation to enhance impact.

Introduction

Building resilience is particularly crucial for Malawi, where most farming households are vulnerable to ongoing natural shocks like prolonged dry spells, floods, pests, and diseases. Studies have shown a significant increase in households facing multiple shocks and repeated shocks between 2010 and 2019. In 2010, about 34% of households reported facing no shocks while nearly all the households reported facing at least one shock in 2019¹. Social support programmes such as cash transfer programmes have been found to have strong effects on food security, cushioning households against weather and economic shocks, strengthening livelihoods, and building household resilience^{2,3}.

The Malawi 2063, the country's long-term development plan, emphasises the importance of

social support programmes in enhancing resilience for individuals, households, and communities against climatic shocks, economic crises, and natural disasters. Malawi implements two main categories of social support programmes, namely the farm input subsidy programmes (FISP), which aim to improve agricultural productivity, and social safety net programmes, which seek to provide direct support to poor and vulnerable households to enhance their wellbeing and resilience. We use the term "social support" to include both categories. Social safety net programmes are operationalised through the Malawi National Social Support Programme (MNSSP) (2018-2023). Under the MNSSP II (2018-2023), the four main social safety net programmes are the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP), the Public Works

Programme (PWP), the School Feeding Programme (SMP), and the Savings and Loan Groups (SLGs)⁴. FISP is implemented to reduce the cost of key agricultural inputs for targeted farming households—primarily subsidizing maize seed and fertiliser⁵.

Concerns have been raised in the literature about targeting inefficiencies in social support programmes, with the current approach leaving out deserving, vulnerable, and eligible households⁶. There have also been reports of an increasing number of households benefiting from multiple social support programmes³. Despite being an outcome of targeting inefficiencies, access to multiple social support programmes can strengthen household resilience by addressing different dimensions of vulnerability, thereby assisting households to graduate out of poverty. However, the impact of multiple social safety nets in enhancing household resilience and food security has not been adequately researched. In a country such as Malawi, where households face multiple climatic and economic shocks, it is important to understand whether accessing multiple social support programmes helps to improve household resilience, which the current study seeks to achieve. This study is important as it generates new empirical evidence on the effectiveness of combining multiple social support programmes to improve resilience. The study findings also offer insights to inform policy decisions on programme design to strengthen household resilience and improve food security in Malawi.

Methodology

The study uses Integrated Household Panel Survey (IHPS) data collected by the National Statistical Office (NSO) with funding from the World Bank⁷. The

data is representative at the national level. The panel data consists of 1,619 households interviewed in 2009/10; 1,990 households in 2012/13; 2,508 households in 2015/16, and 3,178 households in 2018/19. Our analysis is based on a balanced sample of 1,017 households, available in all the survey years.

The Food Consumption Score (FCS) was used as an indicator of food security. FCS is a composite score based on the dietary diversity, frequency of various foods consumed, and the relative nutritional importance of the various food groups consumed. It ranges from 0 to 112, where a higher score indicates greater dietary diversity and increased food frequency consumption⁸.

To measure household resilience, the Resilience Indicators for Measurement and Analysis – II (RIMA II), developed by FAO, was used. RIMA quantitatively estimates household resilience to food insecurity and shows how this resilience relates to key contributing factors. RIMA comprises four resilience pillars: Access to Basic Services (ABS), Adaptive Capacity (AC), Assets (AST), and Social Safety Nets (SSN)⁹. ABS captures access to basic services, measured by the distance to facilities such as roads, markets and district administrative centres. AC captures factors that assist a household to withstand or recover from shocks, such as engagement in self-employment, literacy rates, and education levels. AST represents agricultural and durable assets owned by a household. SSN captures access to social safety nets and

assistance received from various sources including gifts and transfers from relatives and friends.

We considered the following five groups of social support programmes, namely scholarship support (for tertiary and secondary education), public works programmes, free food distribution (free maize, free food other than maize, food/cash for work, free Likuni Phala, supplementary feeding for the malnourished), cash transfer programmes, and access to farm input coupons. These were used because they are the most consistently implemented and nationally recognised interventions during the study period. Consequently, consistent and comparable data on the above social support programmes was available across all survey rounds, allowing us to track access over the years.

To assess the relationship between participation in multiple social support programmes and household food security outcomes and resilience, we employed a fixed-effects panel regression model. Lagged or previous values of the food security and resilience were included to account for the persistence of consumption patterns and resilience status over time. Other explanatory variables included socioeconomic and demographic variables.

The analysis utilised the total number of social support programmes accessed as the primary explanatory variable and other variables such as exposure to multiple shocks, engagement in self-employment activities, household savings, household size, gender of the household head, and education level of the household head. The least resilient

category was chosen as the comparison category to the other two groups (moderate resilient and most resilient).

Key findings

Access to social support programmes

Most households access coupons through the FISP, although the numbers decreased between 2010 and 2019 (Table 1), as the government gradually reduced the number of beneficiaries due to budgetary constraints.

Table 1: Percentage of households that reported benefiting from social support programmes

Social support programme	2010	2013	2016	2019
Farm input subsidy program	62.64	55.95	49.36	39.13
Free distribution of maize	1.38	10.32	12.00	16.91
School feeding program	13.47	19.86	12.39	13.77
Government cash transfers	0.10	0.20	2.46	4.52
Cash transfers from others	0.49	0.10	2.46	1.87
Free food (other than maize)	1.57	7.77	7.57	1.87
Food/cash for work	1.77	1.47	1.97	1.67
Secondary scholarship	0.39	0.39	0.59	1.28
Input for work program	0.20	1.57	0.49	0.59
Free Likuni Phala	0.59	0.49	1.28	0.49
Tertiary scholarship	0.20	0.20	0.29	0.39
Supplementary feeding	0.20	0.20	0.29	0.00
Other social safety nets	0.29	2.36	4.47	3.00

Source: Authors' computations

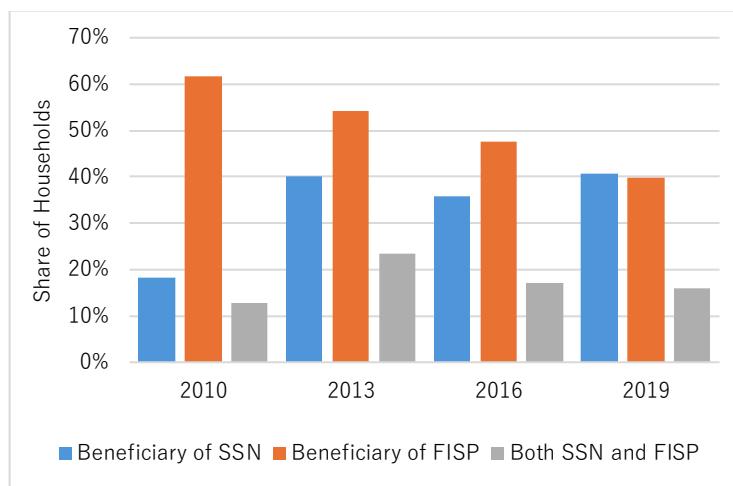
Free maize distribution and school feeding programmes are also among the SSNs with the most beneficiaries over the years and are showing an increasing trend. The number of secondary and tertiary students receiving scholarships has also been increasing over the years, while we observe a declining trend of cash transfers from other

organisations. The share of households benefiting from Government cash transfers increased over the period under study.

Trends in access to social safety nets and farm input subsidy program

The proportion of households benefiting from the FISP has been declining over the years, compared to beneficiaries of any SSNs, whose proportion has relatively remained higher (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of households that accessed both coupons and social safety nets.

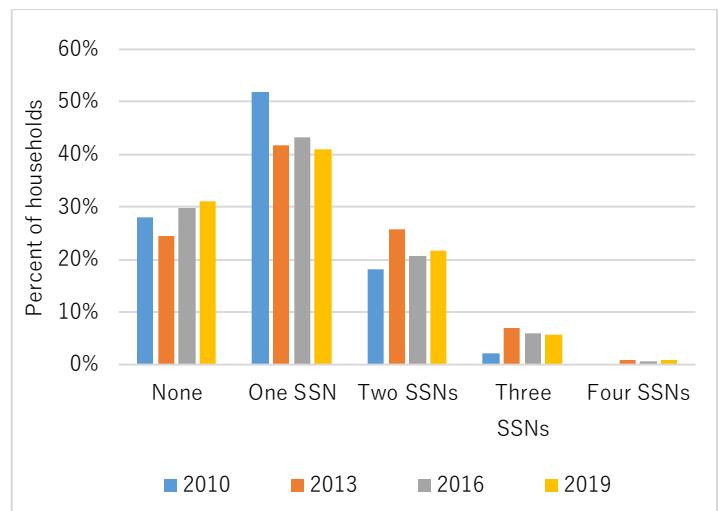


Source: Authors' computations

The share of households benefiting from any of the SSNs and the FISP has relatively remained constant over the years, averaging at 17%. Despite the Government policy of limiting multiple programme participation, the share of households benefiting from multiple social support programmes is significant between 2013 and 2019, following an initial increase from 13% in 2010 to 23% in 2013 (Figure 2). About 28% of the households received two or more social support

programmes in 2019 compared to 27% in 2016 and 34% in 2013.

Figure 2: Share of households that received multiple assistance.



Source: Authors' computations

Relationship between access to multiple social support programmes and household food security

Our analysis shows that households benefiting from a higher number of SSPs exhibit higher FCS, particularly those receiving up to four programmes. Specifically, households receiving four SSPs have an FCS that is on average 9.84 points higher than households with no program. Although exhibiting a positive association, households benefiting from one to three programmes did not show statistically significant differences in FCS compared to non-participants. In addition to multiple program participation, our analysis shows that engagement in self-employment activities is also positively associated with FCS, highlighting the role of income-generating activities in improving household food security.

Table 2: Relationship between multiple social support programmes and FCS

Variable	Coefficient
1 social support program (SSP)	0.269
2 SSPs	0.577
3 SSPs	0.486
4 SSPs	9.837**
Self-employment	4.327***

Source: Authors' computations.

Note: The social support programme variable was coded categorically, with 0 representing households that did not receive any program (reference category), 1 for participation in one program, 2 for two programmes, 3 for three programmes, and 4 for four programmes. *** means significance at 1% and ** refers to significance at 5% level

Relationship between multiple social support programmes and resilience status

Our results show that access to multiple social support programmes is positively associated with household resilience (Table 3). These results suggest that as the number of social support programmes increases, the resilience of a household increases. This pattern becomes more evident when examining the size of the coefficients, which increases in absolute terms with the number of social support programmes. Other factors that improve resilience apart from the number of social support programmes include self-employment, a higher education level of the household head, suggesting the fact that diversified income sources strengthen household capacity to cope with shocks and underscoring the role of human capital in improving food security and adaptive capacity, respectively.

Table 3: Relationship between multiple social support programmes and resilience

Variable	Coefficient
1 SSP	0.609*
2 SSPs	1.131**
3 SSPs	0.303
4 SSPs	1.634*
Self-employment	2.176***
PSLCE	7.755***
JCE	9.522***
MSCE	9.401***

Source: Authors' computations.

Note: *** means significance at 1% and ** refers to significance at 5% level

Recommendations

Three key policy recommendations emerge from this study. Firstly, there is a need to consider bundling complementary social support programmes instead of delivering them in isolation. This could involve deliberately linking cash transfers to other support programmes such as inputs, public works, or school feeding, depending on household needs and local context. Given that households receiving multiple social support programmes demonstrate both higher food consumption scores and greater resilience, strengthening and scaling up integrated social support programmes could enhance their resilience and food security status in Malawi. Secondly, the positive relationship between self-employment and food security and resilience suggests the need to strongly promote household diversification. Policy efforts should be focused on addressing barriers to self-employment by improving access to micro-finance and affordable loans, capacitating households

with enterprise skills, and strengthening linkages to markets. Thirdly, while this study establishes the relationship between access to multiple social support programmes and resilience status or food security, further research should be carried out to understand how bundled social support programmes can assist how in transitioning from becoming less resilient to becoming more resilient.

This Policy Brief should be cited as:

Gondwe, A., Nankwenya, B., Salonga, D.T., and Chiwaula, L. (2025). Policy Brief No. 42. Lilongwe: MwAPATA Institute. Contact: Anderson Gondwe (Email: a.gondwe@mwapata.mw).

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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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