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Beyond Maize – Strengthening District Food Systems in Malawi

A Localized Food Systems Perspective on Mangochi and Mchinji Districts

The Challenge – Maize Dominance, Persistent Food Insecurity

91.6%

of households in Mangochi

48.9%

of households in Mchinji

Experienced months of insufficient food in the past year.

Nearly all smallholder farmers in Mangochi and Mchinji grow maize (97–99%). Yet food insecurity remains widespread:

Maize dominates:

- Land use
- Farmer decision-making
- Food security discourse

But maize alone does not ensure:

- Stable incomes
- Dietary diversity
- Climate resilience

Key Insight:

A maize-centred system can stabilize calories, but it cannot deliver resilient livelihoods or nutrition outcomes.

System Constraints – Production, Diets, and Markets

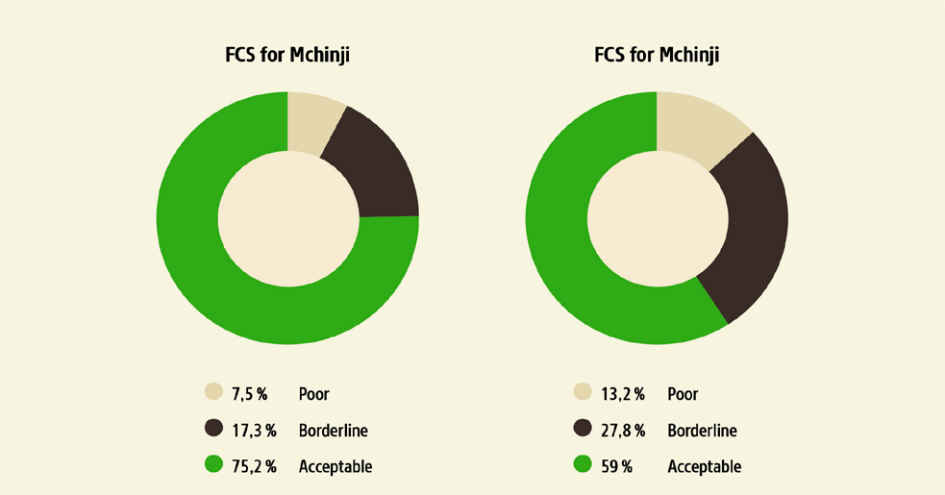
1. PRODUCTION IS WIDESPREAD BUT INSUFFICIENT

Average crop production per household

District	Crop	Area planted – acres (average per household)	Production – Kg (average per household)
Mchinji	Maize	3.3 acres	1185 kg
	Soybean	1.5 acres	397 kg
	Groundnuts	1.25 acres	239 kg
Mangochi	Maize	1.5 acres	462 kg
	Soybean	0.9 acres	188 kg
	Groundnuts	1.1 acres	232 kg

2. DIET QUALITY REMAINS POOR

Diet quality by districts (Food Consumption Score)



NOTE: Food Consumption Score (FCS) measures dietary diversity and frequency of consumption of key food groups over the previous seven days.

Staples are consumed daily, but protein-rich foods only **2–3 times per week**.

Key Insight:

Calorie sufficiency ≠ nutritional adequacy.

3. MARKETS FAIL TO CONVERT PRODUCTION INTO INCOME

Across both districts:

- 81–91% of farmers report low prices
- Transport, storage, and infrastructure constraints affect nearly half
- Contract farming remains limited (10–29%)

Farmers often sell quickly, at low margins, due to:

- Weak aggregation
- Limited storage
- Poor processing capacity

4. VALUE LOSS REDUCES IMPACT

- Critical inefficiencies include:
- High post-harvest losses (e.g. mango)
- Weak fish handling systems (Mangochi)
- Limited processing for groundnuts and soybean (Mchinji)

Key Insight:

Production gains are lost before they translate into income or nutrition.

Structural Differences and System Opportunities

1. UNEVEN DIVERSIFICATION

Mchinji shows stronger diversification and commercialization
Mangochi remains more constrained

Crop and livelihood differences:

- Mchinji: groundnuts, soybean (commercial potential)
- Mangochi: cassava, rice, fisheries (nutrition + income)

Diversification improves:

- Income stability
- Climate resilience
- Market participation

2. ASSETS AND COPING STRATEGIES

Mchinji households show higher ownership of:

- Agricultural tools
- Irrigation equipment
- Transport assets

Coping strategies during food shortages:

Mchinji		Mangochi	
Coping mechanisms	Percentage of households utilizing the coping mechanism	Coping mechanisms	Percentage of households utilizing the coping mechanism
Rely on less expensive food	43.3%	Rely on less expensive food	65.2%
Other (do piecework "ganyu")	40.0%	Reduce number of meals eaten in a day	44.6%
Reduce number of meals eaten in a day	20.0%	Other (do piecework "ganyu")	37.1%
Borrow food from a friend or relative	15.8%	Limit portion size at mealtimes	22.3%
Limit portion size at mealtimes	8.3%	Gather wild food, hunt, or harvest immature food	5.8%
Purchase food on credit	5.0%	Borrow food from a friend or relative	3.1%
Gather wild food, hunt, or harvest immature food	0.8%	Purchase food on credit	1.8%
Send children to eat with neighbours	0.8%	Skip entire days without eating	1.8%
Skip entire days without eating	0.8%	Send children to eat with neighbours	0%

3. FOOD INSECURITY IS STRUCTURAL

Food insecurity is driven not only by production, but by:

- Market failures
- Weak value chains
- Limited assets
- Poor service access

Key Insight:

Food insecurity is a system performance issue, not just a production gap.

The Solution – Building Functional District Food Systems

1. SHIFT FROM PRODUCTION SYSTEMS TO FOOD SYSTEM

Food security outcomes depend on how systems function across:

- Production
- Markets
- Value chains
- Services
- Nutrition

Isolated interventions are insufficient. **Integrated, district-level approaches are required.**

2. PRIORITY VALUE CHAIN FOR TRANSFORMATION

Value Chain	Production & Inputs	Value Addition	Market Opportunities	Inclusion Opportunities
Poultry	Improved breeds and veterinary services	Local feed production	Expanded local poultry markets	Strong participation of women and youth
Groundnuts	Improved seed varieties and crop management	Oil and paste processing	Regional trade and commercial markets	Smallholder commercialization opportunities
Fisheries	Improved handling and storage	Fish drying and processing	Strengthened fish trade networks	Livelihood sector for lake communities
Beekeeping / Honey	Expansion of beekeeping systems	Honey processing and packaging	Niche honey markets	Low-input enterprise suitable for smallholders
Mango	Improved orchard management	Drying, juice, and snack processing	Export and domestic fruit markets	Opportunities for women and youth enterprises

3. ENABLING SERVICES AND SYSTEM SUPPORT

Transformation depends on strengthening:

- Agricultural extension
- Financial services (credit, savings, enterprise support)
- Digital market systems (price information, buyer linkages)

4. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

To strengthen district food systems:

Diversify economic opportunities

- Expand participation across multiple value chains
- Reduce exposure to climate and market shocks
- Strengthen value addition
- Expand local processing capacity
- Increase the share of value retained in rural economies

Improve coordination

- Strengthen collaboration between producers, enterprises, including informal market actors, and institutions
- Align investments across the system

Support inclusive participation

- Expand opportunities for women and youth
- Strengthen entrepreneurship across agricultural value chains

FINAL MESSAGE

Improving food security in Malawi requires moving beyond production-focused approaches.

The priority is to build functional, inclusive, and resilient district food systems that convert production into:

- Income
- Nutrition
- Long-term resilience