



**Final Evaluation of the SDG Fund Joint Program
Social Protection for the Sustainable Development Goals in
Malawi: Accelerating Inclusive Progress Towards the
Sustainable Development Goals (2020-2021)**

Decentralized Evaluation

Final Report

WFP, UNICEF, and ILO Malawi



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Executive Summary

1. This is the final evaluation report of the Joint SDG Fund Joint Program (JP) - Social Protection for the Sustainable Development Goals (SP4SDG) in Malawi: Accelerating inclusive progress towards the SDGs (2020-2021). The report was jointly commissioned by the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Malawi under the WFP Decentralized Evaluation Quality Assurance System (DEQAS).
2. The SP4SDG aims to support the Government of Malawi (GoM) to enhance the Malawi social protection system to meet emergency food needs and reduce the vulnerability of those most at risk of food insecurity by 2022, while strengthening the social protection system for all vulnerable households across the lifecycle. The Joint Program (JP) combines advancing an innovative Shock-Sensitive Social Protection (SSSP) prototype with reinforced financial structures and the transformation of existing policies into the basis of a legal framework to enhance the existing social protection system to be more robust, comprehensive, and sustainable, leaving no one behind.
3. The specific objectives of the evaluation were to assess the extent of achievement of the targets set out in the JP Results Framework. The purpose of the evaluation was to meet commitments to determine the reasons why certain results occurred or not to draw lessons, derive good practices and pointers for learning and inform operational decision-making. The evaluation covers two levels: firstly, interventions on strengthening the national social protection system, and secondly implementation of project activities at local government district level. The evaluation covers the period January 2020 to September 2021.
4. The main stakeholders of the evaluation are the GoM, the country and regional offices of WFP, UNICEF and ILO. The evaluation findings will be used by GoM, WFP, UNICEF, ILO, and other key stakeholders to enhance Social Protection SDG targets in the design and implementation of other similar programs in future, including options for resourcing and financing.

Context

5. Landlocked Malawi (see [Annex 14](#) for the map of Malawi) is a densely populated country with 18.6 million people of which over half are under 18 years of age. Poverty remains high in Malawi, with over half (50.7 percent) of the population living below the poverty line and 20.5 percent of it being in extreme poverty, as of 2019/2020. The economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, and 80 percent of the population depend on rain-fed smallholdings, which are vulnerable to climatic shocks. Majority of smallholder farmers are women, and gender inequalities affect all aspects of social, economic, and environmental development. Poverty rates are highest among households headed by women.

Methodology

6. The evaluation was designed to assess the SP4SDG JP against the following evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness & coverage, efficiency, impact, and sustainability, gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) as well as equity issues. The evaluation assessed the JP interventions using 7 core questions and 17 sub-questions adhering to the standard Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC/OECD) evaluation criteria.
7. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative criteria to collect both primary and secondary data using a range of techniques. The field data collection exercise was conducted in September 2021. The evaluation team (ET) carried out 874 household interviews with beneficiary and non-beneficiary households in Nsanje district to gather quantitative data. Qualitative data processes involved key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) with men and women beneficiaries and key national and district level stakeholders which included desk review of documentation related to the social protection sector.
8. There were several limitations, chiefly related to the timing of the evaluation which was undertaken during the period of implementation of the SP4SDG project as well as under COVID-19 restrictions. In this regard, the evaluation could not capture the anticipated full range of achievements envisaged in the JP

results framework. Delays in accessing acceptable baseline data sets were overcome by the ET exploring different options to fill gaps such as reviewing published reports by the UN agencies. The ET had to adapt to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis through conducting some qualitative data gathering processes remotely. Conducting remote interviews through consultations with key informants at the national level were not without significant challenges. The evaluation interviews extended well into the field work and data analysis phase causing delays.

Key Findings

9. The key findings of the ET are summarised below, structured according to the main evaluation criteria, indicating the type and strength of evidence supporting the findings.

EVALUATION CRITERIA 1: RELEVANCE

Evaluation question 1: To what extent were the objectives of SP4SDG valid and appropriate with UN and national policies and how have these remained relevant over time?

10. The SP4SDG objectives remained valid throughout the implementation period under review. The JP retained relevance to the existing policy context environment and where appropriate adapted a number of development objectives, in response to GoM requests in relation to COVID-19 and refocusing of Outcome 3.

11. The JP's results framework is structured to ensure it underpinned the objectives of GoM and UN strategic policies. The Malawi National Social Support Programme (MNSSP II) is the overarching social protection policy framework which places emphasis on three pillars: 1) consumption support, 2) resilient livelihoods, and 3) shock-sensitive social protection. The SP4SDG results framework components are intrinsically aligned to the MNSSP II policy pillars and through the JP it has generated, according to several key informant interviews, considerable learning for the Government to build upon in order to refine existing policy and programmatic processes.

12. The JP was instrumental in supporting the multi-agency government led Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) and Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) studies to identify of the most vulnerable communities requiring the Lean Season Response (LSR). In this regard, the JP provided technical support to key social protection organisations in Nsanje and Balaka Districts. The main ones in Nsanje, where the LSR of December 2020 to March 2021 was implemented, are the District Social Support Committee (DSSC), Government departments (disaster management affairs, agriculture, community development, education and the police). In addition, the JP built the capacity of various Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that are implementing social protection (SP) in the district. These include Malawi Red Cross Society (MRCS), GOAL Malawi and Concern Worldwide. The same organisations were involved in the MVAC assessment of 2020 whose results informed the programming of the aforementioned LSR that the PUNOs implemented.

13. The COVID-19 pandemic increased and shifted the scope of the JP. The JP and its results framework were never intended to support an urban intervention. As a result of COVID-19, there was a necessity to re-design key areas of the original JP work plan. The Operational Steering Committee of the Joint SDG fund approved the option of re-purposing up to 20 percent of JP funding to respond to the pandemic to ensure SP interventions and Leave No One Behind objectives were maintained. The development partners (DPs) supported the GoM's COVID-19 Urban Cash Intervention (CUCI) in four cities and several districts while the JP supported the CUCI to 1,270 households in Nsanje.

EVALUATION CRITERIA: COHERENCE

Evaluation question 2: How coherent is the program within the context of the social protection policy environment in Malawi, in what way are the PUNOs interventions aligned to support and fit within this policy space in the country?

14. The JP resides and fits firmly within the social protection and humanitarian policy space in Malawi. The PUNOs interventions, informed by previous areas of engagement within the sector, attempted and in some areas succeeded in aligning with and supporting the GoM policy environment working in close collaboration with DPs. Key progress on systems strengthening, providing lessons for enhanced social protection service delivery, and influencing an increase in GoM financial resource allocations to social

protection, is work in progress.

EVALUATION CRITERIA: EFFECTIVENESS & COVERAGE

Evaluation question 3: To what extent have the targeted outputs, outcomes, strategic results, and interventions been achieved, or expect to be achieved taking account of their relative importance?

15. The JP approach, setting out its interventions to align with a cornerstone of GoM policy objectives, was broadly successful. It is envisaged that the new policy framework, currently under review by the JP, will lead to increased coverage of social protection through the inclusion of social insurance schemes which targets workers in the informal sector. The JP's lean season response (LSR) intervention achieved its goal of improving food security of the most vulnerable households in Nsanje, and the JP made a significant contribution to providing the GoM with the potential basis for a shock-sensitive social protection model to be replicated at scale.

16. The evaluation found that the JP's contribution to the lean season response has improved food security and reduced the use of negative coping strategies in the context of where the program was operational. Descriptive analysis of the evaluation household survey data shows that 97.4 percent of the households were either in the acceptable (food secure/mildly food insecure) or borderline (moderately food insecure) categories of food consumption score (FCS). This figure surpasses the 80 percent target for 2021 the program proposed at the outset by 17.4 percentage points. At baseline, only 1.6 percent of the households were food secure and as such the majority relied on negative coping strategies to survive.

17. Despite failure to reach the set reduced coping strategy index (rCSI) value of 12 by the project, the trend-line indicates a reduction in shocks experienced by vulnerable families. The reduction in rCSI can be attributed to the JP as well as other initiatives in Nsanje district. However, it is sufficing to say that the LSR support of December 2020 to March 2021 cushioned the beneficiary households from severe food shortages. The households dedicated their time to farming under rain-fed agriculture and residual moisture when the rainy season was coming to an end in March 2021. This helped them extend months of self-food sufficiency.

18. The JP utilized relevant data and information available to identify appropriate interventions to effectively respond in the context of the Lean season crisis. The JP was instrumental in providing critical support to the COVID-19 Urban Cash Intervention (CUCI) (CUCI) established in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This generated useful learning for responding to future pandemics.

EVALUATION CRITERIA: EFFICIENCY

Evaluation question 4: Was the program efficiently implemented (specifically cost effectiveness / value for money), and how was this converted to results?

19. Efficiency of the JP program was assessed to be relatively good. Through the field data collection process the evaluation heard from stakeholders who observed that the JP's LSR had been implemented in an efficient manner. The level of efficiency compares favourably with other similar national social protection programs. For example, the implementing costs of the LSR cash-based transfer in Nsanje is estimated at around 6.5 percent for the horizontal expansion. The vertical expansion component, implemented via the national system during a few months of the lean season, is estimated to be 1 percent. As for the regular Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP) transfers, available data shows that implementation costs are less than 15 percent.

20. Utilizing the Malawi Red Cross Society (MRCS) as the monitoring agent working in tandem with Logistics and Transport Services (LTS) as the financial service provider probably offered the best value for money option in the circumstances of time efficiency. The MRCS demonstrated compliance with all contract provisions. This includes timeliness in the delivery of cash transfers, timely submission of pay-out and funds reconciliation reports, and compliance with the approved distribution plans and full accountability for the funds advanced. No cases of misappropriation or abuse of funds were recorded.

21. The overall budget for the LSR Cash Based Transfer (CBT) consisted of four components:

- a) Unconditional cash transfers (direct manual cash payments to the selected beneficiaries)

- b) Administrative and capital budgets (program running costs, capital inputs including contract for LTS and honoraria for other actors)
- c) Contingency funds to allow for variations in need during the implementation phase, and payment of GoM value added tax (VAT)
- d) Capacity building budget to orient staff, social protection organizations and other stakeholders at the district and community levels

22. The overall JP's LSR CBT budget for Nsanje was US\$474,002. This was fully utilized by the time the LSR CBT intervention ended in March 2021. The proportion of the budget allocated to delivery or administrative costs, such as staff time, capacity building and other running costs, was US\$32,600. The JP spent 93.8 percent of this allocation (US\$30,588). This represents 6.5 percent of the total cash transfer value of US\$474,002 provided. The cost of delivery per direct recipient household for the whole LSR intervention period was therefore very efficient at US\$6.12. Other overhead costs included payments of MK575 per kilometer for mileage travelled by the financial service providers and 16.5 percent value added tax (VAT) to the government on all costs.

EVALUATION CRITERIA: IMPACT

Evaluation question 5: What is the potential impact that can be envisioned, and what are the initial signs of evidence towards achieving development objectives?

23. Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from the evaluation show that the JP has to a larger extent achieved its goal of accelerating inclusive progress towards the sustainable development goals.

24. In the context of outcome 1 adapting the SCT with a shock sensitive social protection LSR interventions, through the 4-month vertical and horizontal expansion of existing CBT benefits, made a difference in reaching vulnerable people. These people were reached using the government UBR system which identified the most vulnerable groups. The LSR was successful in reaching people who otherwise may not have been reached. This has a positive impact at both the household and community level. At household level, the government is also implementing SCT which usually target limited number of beneficiaries. The coming in of the JP increased the number of SCT beneficiaries. This had a significant impact at community level because number of families lacking food reduced. It is a demonstrable example to GoM that the existing social protection (SP) systems can be effectively adapted to meet specific crisis needs – both in terms of a periodic LSR and an urban CBT in response to public health emergencies such as COVID-19.

25. At the time of the evaluation fieldwork in September 2021, no household was receiving relief food or cash due to food insecurity. Households were able to both purchase food or replenish foods from their own production if this had been consumed or just to complement their stock provisions. The number of food self-sufficiency months based only on staple maize and sorghum from rain-fed agriculture in the 2020/2021 season was 2.48 for the beneficiaries and 2.78 for non-beneficiary households on average.

26. The capacity strengthening component initiative under outcome 1 has limited scope in terms of numbers of officials reached. However, within the resources and timescales available this initiative was

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