

Malawi Livelihood Profile

Mzimba Self-Sufficient Zone

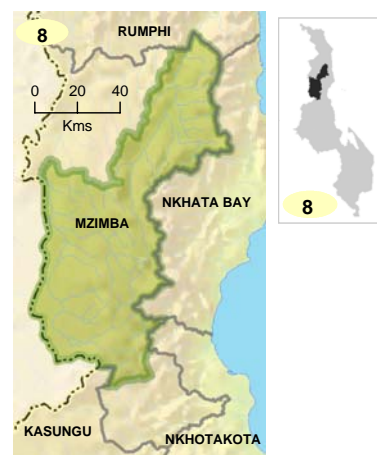
Zone Description

Crops and livestock are the basis of the economy in the Mzimba self-sufficient livelihood zone. Tobacco provides the single most important source of cash income, with both burley and oriental varieties being grown. Maize, cassava, sweet potato and groundnuts are the main food crops, supplemented by smaller quantities of pulses and millet. The zone produces a small food surplus in a 'normal' year and maize, cassava, groundnuts and Soya beans are exported in most years.

Cattle holdings are relatively high in this zone compared to elsewhere in the country. This is important in three ways; oxen provide a source of draft power for ploughing and for transport (ox-carts), sale of livestock provides a significant source of income, and cattle provide milk for consumption.

As elsewhere, most of the zone's production is concentrated in the hands of the 'better-off' and – to a lesser extent – the 'middle'. The poorest 30% of households do not own cattle, and their crop production covers no more than two-thirds of their minimum annual energy requirement. This is more than in other zones – the explanation being the widespread cultivation of cassava as a secondary crop after maize. The balance of 'Poor' households' food intake comes from purchases and in-kind payments for *ganyu*. Cash incomes for the 'poor' are relatively low in the zone, mainly because there are few alternatives for generating cash other than sale of crops and sale of labour.

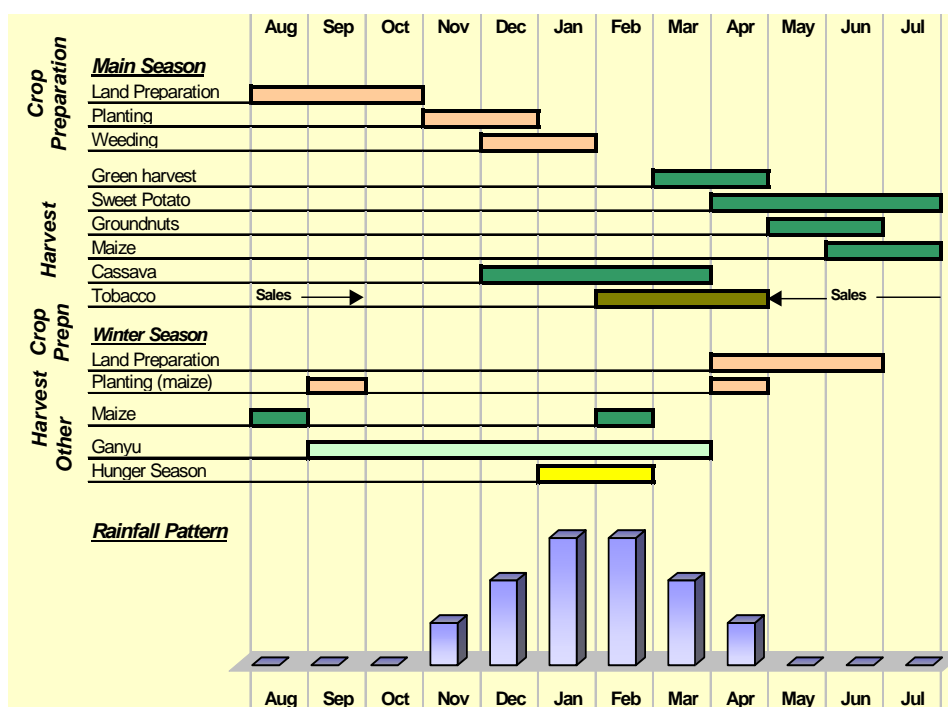
Mzimba Self Sufficient



Total Population (2004) 411,021

Quite a large number of households – mainly from the 'middle' and 'better-off' – have one or more household members or close relatives living and working away from home, either in Southern Africa or elsewhere in Malawi. There does not appear to be a regular pattern of remittance, however, with receipts being irregular and unreliable.

Seasonal Calendar



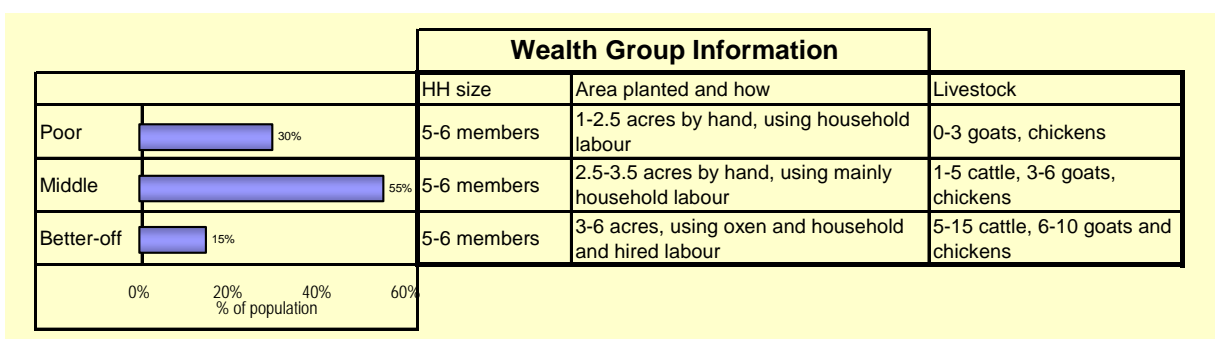
Harvesting of the main season crops (maize, groundnuts, pulses and sweet potatoes) takes place from April to July. For a typical or 'middle' household, these crops last until roughly the end of November (i.e. 8 months). From then until March, 'middle' households rely on a combination of cassava, staple food purchase and in-kind payment for casual labour (*ganyu*). Small quantities of maize and vegetables are also grown in *dimba* gardens in low-lying wetter areas. Two harvests of maize can be obtained from these gardens, the most important of which is in February, a key pre-harvest month. Although there is an annual hungry season as elsewhere in the country, the severity of this is cushioned by two factors: the availability of cassava and the availability of *dimba* maize in February.

Markets

Burley tobacco is sold to the Mzuzu auction floors, while oriental tobacco is sold locally to the Limbe Leaf Company. Of the food crops sold, maize is sent northwards, to Mzuzu and neighbouring Tanzania, while cassava is sent south, to Kasungu and Lilongwe. Sweet potatoes are produced in reasonable quantities, but there is little external market for these, and prices can be very low (as they were in 2003, at the time of the current baseline assessment). Both summer and winter vegetables are grown and are sold locally and along the M1 (Mzuzu-Kasungu-Lilongwe) highway.

Cattle are exported from the zone to slaughterhouses in Lilongwe, Mzuzu, Nkhata Bay and Rumphu. Small stock are also sold, but mainly to local markets within the zone.

Wealth Breakdown



As elsewhere, there are large differences in this zone between wealth groups in terms of area cultivated, yields obtained and the numbers and types of livestock kept. The 'better-off' cultivate between 2-3 times the area of the 'poor', and therefore harvest 2-3 times more of all crops, including groundnuts, cassava and sweet potato. The production difference is even greater for maize and tobacco, mainly because these crops benefit significantly from inputs that the poor cannot afford (including fertiliser and labour), and for which they are unable to obtain credit.

Cattle ownership is widespread in this zone, with most households owning from 1-5 cattle, while the 'better-off' own 5-15 head, of which at least two are likely to be oxen. Ox ploughing is therefore more common in this zone than elsewhere, but is apparently on the decline, since spare parts for ploughs and other equipment have been in short supply since the demise of the system of 'farmers clubs' some years ago.

Sources of Food



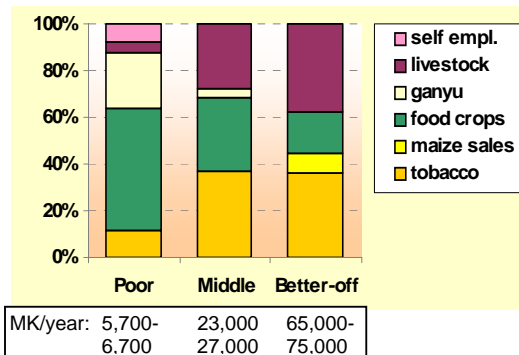
Total food access increases from 'poor' to 'middle' to 'better-off', in line with wealth group differences in crop production and livestock holding.

For all three groups most food comes from own crop production (mainly maize and cassava). Purchase and in-kind payment for *ganyu* are the other major food sources for the 'poor' and the 'middle'. 'Better-off' households also purchase food, but mainly to add variety to their diet (sugar, oil, rice, fish, beans etc.). Consumption of milk is significant for the 'better-off', linked to the number of cattle owned by this group.

Sources of Cash

The 'poor' in this zone have very low cash incomes, which can purchase only one-third of cereals required for their minimum food energy requirements. They produce very little tobacco and depend largely upon the sale of crops and *ganyu*. There is little demand locally for firewood, grass or handicrafts, which in other areas contribute significantly to 'poor' incomes. This is due to the remoteness of the zone from any urban centre.

Very roughly, the 'middle' and 'better-off' groups earn a third their income from each of three sources: sale of tobacco, sale of food crops and sale of livestock. They sell the same crops as the 'poor', but in larger quantities. Sale of cattle provides most of the income from livestock sales.



Hazards

Chronic/Frequent hazards: As in many other areas of the country, dry spells or excessive rainfall and waterlogging are the most common causes of reduced crop production in the zone. One or a combination of these affects the zone in most years. The dry spells have a huge impact on crop production when they occur at the critical stage of crop development such as tasselling in maize. Crop diseases and pests also affect the zone from time to time, and district officers mentioned Grey Leaf Spot and Bean Beetle as the most significant recent problems in this respect.

Periodic Hazard: Severe crop failure occurs when there is a prolonged dry spell (drought). Diseases affecting cattle, such as foot-and-mouth, are a cause for concern in the area, as cattle play an important role in the food economy of this zone; they are used for ploughing, they provide milk and they are sold to generate cash income.

Response Strategies

Households respond to shocks in two ways; they expand existing strategies and when the situation is severe, they turn to a number of distress strategies. The table below lists some of the strategies household were found to employ.

Expansion of Existing Strategies

Increased consumption of cassava: Cassava is an important reserve crop grown by all three wealth groups in the zone, and consumption of cassava is increased when other crops fail.

Livestock sales: An important strategy for the 'middle' and 'better-off', given the level of cattle holdings in the zone.

Local Ganyu. Expansion of *ganyu* within the locality is a strategy pursued by both 'poor' and 'middle' households in the zone. Although efforts may be made to find more *ganyu*, the overall effectiveness of the strategy is limited since little additional work may be available and labour rates tend to decline in a crisis.

Food purchase. Food purchases can be expanded using income generated from livestock sales or *ganyu*, or by switching expenditure on non-food items (e.g. clothes) to staple foods. This is limited for the 'poor' by low incomes.

Wild foods: This is not an effective response to food shortage in this zone, since few of the available wild foods provide significant amounts of food energy. Wild fruits are available, but these tend to have relatively low energy content.

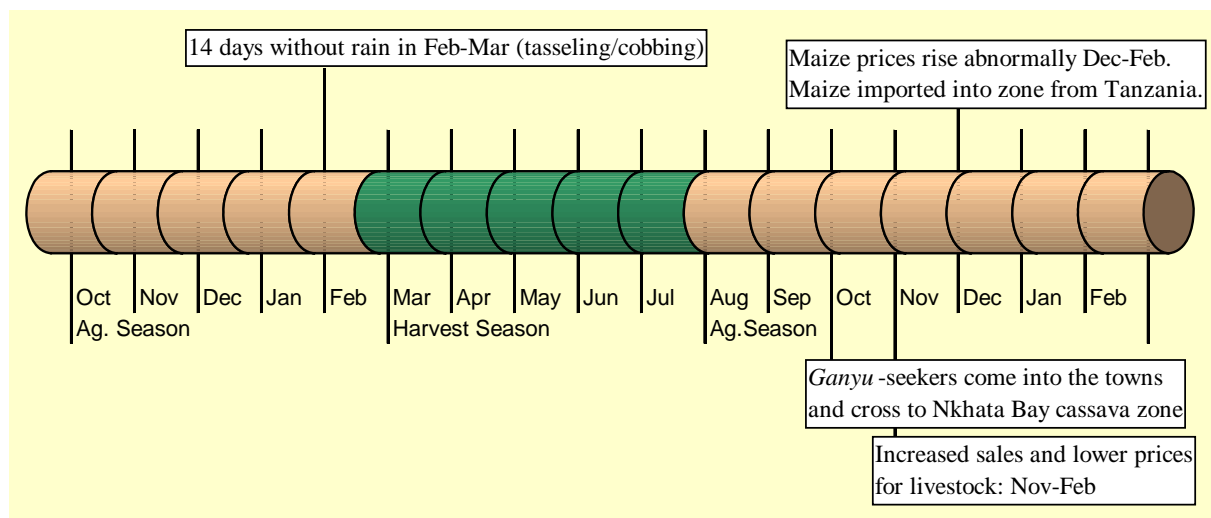
Distress Strategies

Distant Ganyu: Migrating to urban centres and neighbouring Nkhata Bay cassava zone in search of *ganyu*. The *ganyu* in Nkhata Bay is usually in exchange of cassava.

Asset sales: An option for all three wealth groups, but of limited value to 'poor' households given their small asset holdings. The 'poor' will sell clothes and furniture, while the 'middle' are more likely to sell bicycles or radios.

Crisis Warning Indicators

The figure below illustrates the main crisis warning indicators for the zone and their timing as the season progresses. A dry spell at a critical stage of the maize growing season (February/March) provides the most significant early indication of crop failure. There may then be few further indications of crisis until the following October, when significant movements from the rural areas in search of *ganyu* are likely to be observed. Market-based indicators (prices, importation of maize, etc.) may not show significant change until as late as November.



Main Conclusions and Implications for Programming

The zone is highly productive. A lot crops such as maize, cassava, sweet potatoes, millet etc. are grown in the zone and have relatively high yields. The zone also has many livestock, with cattle playing a crucial role as a source food and income. The area exports cassava to Mzuzu, Kasungu and Lilongwe. The lack of markets for commodities such as sweet potatoes results in very low prices for farmers.

Income is very low for 'poor' households; this inhibits their ability to get adequate food, both in quantity (energy) and quality terms. It also restricts their coping options, as they cannot switch expenditure to purchase food when there is a crop failure.

Implications for Programming

- ❑ *Improved market infrastructure for both crops and animals are essential to ensure that farmers have access to markets and good prices for their commodity which will act as an incentive to production.*
- ❑ *Alternative income-generating options need to be explored; products need to be made more marketable.*
- ❑ *All wealth groups mentioned access to fertilizer as the most important factor that would ensure increased agricultural production. The area has high potential for increased production if access to inputs is improved.*
- ❑ *The households suggested development of farmers clubs as one way of improving access to input credit.*