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Ready to Respond to Freddy?

Shock-Responsive Social Protection for Nutrition in Malawi

by

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Abstract: The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing pace and intensity of climate-related shocks have driven the emergence of international interest around the role of national social protection systems for shock-responsiveness. An increasing number of already vulnerable people is in need of humanitarian assistance, risking to fall into poverty and malnutrition. In this context, predictable national social protection systems can have a role by leveraging their infrastructure and know-how to scale-up and adapt in response to shocks, reducing the need of ad-hoc humanitarian aid. Malawi is a shock-prone country, frequently hit by seasonal food scarcity and climatic shocks. In March 2023, Tropical Cyclone Freddy made landfall in the country, leaving more than a 1,000 people dead and over 500,000 displaced. Over one third of children under five in Malawi is stunted, meaning that they will never reach their full cognitive and physical development. Ever since the devastating effects of El Niño in 2016/17, the Government of Malawi has recognized shock-sensitive social protection as a national priority, necessary to break the cycle of poverty and vulnerability that is currently preventing the country from embarking on a sustainable economic development path. Through a descriptive qualitative case study, the thesis analyses the policy and programmes environment in Malawi in relation to shock-responsive social protection. Furthermore, it explores how different social protection programmes were scaled up in recent years to respond to shocks. Finally, it assesses to what extent are the social protection programmes designed in a nutrition-sensitive way, which refers to whether they are specifically targeted to the prevention and reduction of malnutrition, given the long-lasting effect that it has on the next generation of human capital of a country. The results from the case study of Malawi highlight the potential of using social protection for shock-responsiveness, while drawing attention on worrying gaps in nutrition-sensitive designs of social protection programmes.

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Table of Contents

- 1 Introduction 1**
 - 1.1 Research Problem..... 2
 - 1.2 Aim and Scope 2
- 2 Theoretical Framework 4**
 - 2.1 The Relevance of Nutrition-Sensitive Programmes 5
 - 2.2 Shock-Responsive Social Protection for Nutrition 6
- 3 Country Profile: Malawi..... 9**
- 4 Previous Research 12**
 - 4.1 Social Protection and Nutrition Evidence 12
 - 4.2 Shock-Responsive Social Protection Evidence 13
 - 4.3 (Shock-Sensitive) Social Protection in Malawi 14
- 5 Research Design..... 16**
 - 5.1 Data and Methodology 16
 - 5.2 Limitations 18
- 6 Empirical Analysis 20**
 - 6.1 Shock-Responsiveness Modalities 24
 - 6.2 Nutrition-Sensitive Checklist 25
 - 6.3 Discussion 27
- 7 Conclusion..... 29**
 - 7.1 Practical Implications and Future Research 30
- References 31**

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Malawi national policies relevant for shock-responsive social protection	20
Table 2. Summary of main social protection programmes in Malawi	21

List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfers
CUCI	Covid-19 Urban Cash Intervention
DEVCO	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ENSO	El Niño and La Niña Southern Oscillation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FISP	Farm Input Support Programme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HDI	Human Development Index
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICN2	Second International Conference on Nutrition
LDF	Local Development Fund
MASAF	Malawi Social Action Fund
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MGDS III	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III
MIS	Management and Information System
MNSSP II	Malawi national Social Support Programme II
MVAC	Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee
MW2063	Malawi Vision 2063
NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
NMNP	National Multi-Sector Nutrition Policy

NMNSP	National Multi-Sector Strategic Plan
NS	Nutrition-Sensitive
NSP	Nutrition-Sensitive Programmes
NSSP	National Social Support Policy
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PLW	Pregnant and Lactating Women
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
PWP	Public Works Programme
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trials
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SBCC	Social and Behavioural Change Communication
SCTP	Social Cash Transfer Programme
SMPs	School Meal Programmes
SRSP	Shock-Responsive Social Protection
SUN	Scaling Up for Nutrition
UBR	Unified Beneficiary Registry
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
USP2030	Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the SDG 2030
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

“The Covid-19 crisis has brought social protection to the forefront as a crisis response tool” (Bastagli & Lowe, 2021, p.1). Humanitarian crises, including economic challenges and climate change, are becoming more frequent, severe, complex and protracted (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development [DEVCO], European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations [ECHO] & Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations [NEAR], 2019, p.7). In the last 50 years, the number of natural disasters and correspondent people affected has been following an upward trend and climate change is expected to exacerbate this tendency, causing additional million people to fall into poverty (Bowen et al., 2020, p.1). The negative effects of shocks can be contained if social protection instruments are already in place and are structured to be quickly adapted in a timely manner to mitigate resulting destitution (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2015, p.26). Along these lines, in 2016 the World Bank and the International Labour Organization jointly initiated the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (USP2030) as an alliance of governments, international and regional organizations and civil society, committed to ensuring social protection for all (Universal Social Protection 2030 [USP2030], 2022).

People who are already poor struggle to meet their daily basic needs and are therefore highly vulnerable even to small shocks, that threaten to push them even closer to destitution, starvation or even premature mortality (Committee on World Food Security, 2014, p.31). By preventing the depletion of assets and improving the capacity to cope with disasters, social protection can reduce the need for ad-hoc humanitarian assistance, providing a more long-term and predictable mechanism of managing shocks (World Food Programme [WFP], 2021a, p.1). If well-designed, with clear nutritional objectives and indicators and targeted to the most vulnerable groups, social protection can also be effective in preventing increases in malnutrition as a consequence of shocks, which can have irreversible effects for the human capital of a country (Alderman, 2015, p.4). When children are malnourished in the first 1,000 days of their lives, their cognitive and physical development is impaired for the rest of their lives, preventing them from ever reaching their full potential (WFP, 2018, p.8).

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2022) estimates that over 40 million people have been food insecure in the region over the past five years. “Policy initiatives aimed at tackling the region’s food insecurity and malnutrition challenges have been unable to reverse worsening trends. The cumulative impact of cascading and interacting shocks risks reversing decades of improvements [...] in Southern Africa” (WFP, 2020, p.1). As the most recent shock in the region, Cyclone Freddy, considered the longest-lasting tropical storm on record, has made landfall twice in Southern Africa between the 6th of February and the 11th of March 2023, killing

over 1,000 people and displacing over half a million across Madagascar, Mozambique and Malawi (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2023). Malawi, which was already struggling with one of its deadliest cholera outbreaks, was the worst hit this time, with a death toll of over 600 people and over 500 still missing (AlJazeera, 2023). With already over one third of children under five being stunted, if not prepared to cope with such shocks, the malnutrition rates in the country are destined to grow, putting at risk the physical and cognitive development of the next generation (Global Nutrition Report, 2023).

1.1 Research Problem

Having experienced more than 19 major floods and seven droughts over the past five decades, increasing in frequency and intensity over time (Government of Malawi, 2019), the Government of Malawi has recognized the adoption of a shock-sensitive social protection¹ system as a national priority for food and nutrition security (Government of Malawi, 2017; Republic of Malawi, 2018). Ever since the devastating effects of El Niño in 2016/17, when one third of the population was in need of humanitarian assistance (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.9), there have been different episodes of national social protection programmes being scaled-up during and after shocks, as a complementary tool to humanitarian responses (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.17). Although some research is emerging in relation to the shock-responsive potential of social protection, the literature is still scarce and it rarely focuses on the linkages with malnutrition prevention, despite the direct impact it has on the future human capital of countries (WFP, 2018, p.9). With crucial policy implications for the current response to Cyclone Freddy's humanitarian damages in Southern Africa, the thesis aims at understanding the evolution of shock-sensitive social protection in Malawi since 2016, how were social protection programmes scaled-up in response to shocks and to what extent are they sensitive to nutrition issues. More specifically, the overarching research question is formulated as follows: *How shock-responsive and nutrition-sensitive is the social protection system in Malawi?*

1.2 Aim and Scope

The thesis purpose is to explore the emergent experiences of the use of social protection systems to respond to shocks, as a complementary and more sustainable and predictable tool than ad-

¹ Shock-sensitive social protection in Malawi is used as a broader term to encompass the more commonly used terms 'shock-responsive' and/or 'adaptive' social protection (UNICEF & WFP, 2022, p.6). The thesis uses the more globally adopted term 'shock-responsive' when speaking in general and it sporadically uses the term 'shock-sensitive' when specifically referring to the case study of the social protection system in Malawi.

hoc humanitarian responses. It aims at filling the gap in the literature on the topic by focusing on the case study of Malawi, a country regularly hit by shocks, with high malnutrition rates, who has been prioritising and building up a shock-sensitive social protection system in the past decade. By studying the policy and programme environment, reviewing the experience in terms of scaling-up social protection programmes, analysing in which way these were scaled up and to what extent these are nutrition-sensitive, the thesis contributes to enhancing the understanding of tools that play a role in the achievement of food and nutrition security. In particular, among the four dimensions of food security, namely i) food availability, ii) food access, iii) food utilization and iv) stability (FAO, 2006), the thesis relates to the fourth one: stability. This refers to ensuring that households or individuals “do not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks (e.g. an economic or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity)” (FAO, 2006, p.1). In fact, the WFP Nutrition Policy (2017, p.5) identifies seasonal food scarcity and climatic shocks as drivers of malnutrition and morbidity, that can push already vulnerable individuals into a food and nutrition crisis. Governments are often poorly prepared to provide social protection benefits for many additional people who are pushed into poverty as a result of shocks, while “a country’s ability to rapidly scale-up social assistance depends heavily on the infrastructure of their social safety nets and the capacity to mobilize and direct resources quickly” (Ecker et al., 2023, p.2).

2 Theoretical Framework

Nutrition goes beyond food security by targeting the quality and variety of food intake besides the quantity of it. Consequently, food security is not directly translated into nutritional security (Devereux & Nzabamwita, 2018). Good nutrition is achieved when a person absorbs the right nutrients (through breastfeeding in early life and a diversified diet later) without expelling them (for example through diarrheal dehydration) (WFP, 2018, p.16). In relation to this, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2020) identified inadequate dietary intake and disease as the two immediate causes of malnutrition. Opposite of good nutrition, malnutrition can take three main forms: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency or overweight. Undernutrition is then further distinguished into wasting, stunting or underweight (WFP, 2018, p.8). Wasting is an indication of acute malnutrition, i.e. rapid loss of weight., while stunting indicates chronic malnutrition, i.e. being too short for your age (WFP, 2018, pp.158–162). The relevance of studying nutrition becomes evident when we understand that malnutrition increases the risk of diseases (the so-called malnutrition-infection cycle) and of death, with the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) estimating that “45 percent of all deaths in children under five could be averted if undernutrition did not exist”.

Besides being a violation of the human right to food, malnutrition is also detrimental for economic growth and development as it damages the human capital of the next generation (Alderman et al., 2013, p.27). This is due to the intergenerational character of malnutrition: malnourished women give birth to low weight children already stunted at birth, whose cognitive and physical development will be impaired for life (WFP, 2018, p.9). Additionally, evidence shows that children's learning and productivity potential is largely determined by their health and nutrition in the first two years of their life, commonly known as “the window of opportunity” of a 1,000 days (WFP, 2018, p.65). While undernutrition undermines economic growth, the opposite relationship is somewhat complex. Through a cross-country fixed effects analysis, Alderman et al. (2013, p.51) find that a doubling of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita would reduce stunting by 14.8 percent and underweight by 11.4 percent, with the initially high level of inequality causing higher levels of malnutrition. Furthermore, by analysing a scenario with the highest income growth that each country has registered in the past decade and incorporating a five percent reduction in inequality, the reduction in malnutrition incidence is still small (Alderman et al., 2013, pp.51–52). Overall, this shows that economic growth alone is not enough in the fight against malnutrition.

2.1 The Relevance of Nutrition-Sensitive Programmes

Nutrition-sensitive programmes (NSP) address the underlying causes of undernutrition through complementary sectors other than nutrition, such as agriculture, social protection, education, early child development, water and sanitation (Ruel & Alderman, 2013). The underlying issues that NSP address include poverty, food insecurity, poor maternal health, education, social status or empowerment, limited access to water, sanitation, hygiene and health services (Leroy et al., 2016). These are grouped under the three main underlying causes of malnutrition identified by UNICEF, namely inadequate access to food, inadequate care for children and women, and insufficient health services and unhealthy environment (UNICEF, 2020). This is in contrast with nutrition-specific programmes, which address the immediate determinants of undernutrition, identified by UNICEF (2020) as inadequate diets and inadequate care. While NSP are carried out in other sectors non-specific to nutrition, they include clear nutrition goals, actions and indicators and are targeted to nutritionally vulnerable groups (Olney et al., 2020). The FAO (2015, pp.11–12) identifies a series of requirements that make a programme nutrition-sensitive. A NSP must: 1) target the nutritionally vulnerable, 2) incorporate explicit nutrition objectives and indicators, 3) empower women and make them recipients of social protection benefits, 4) promote strategies that enable households to diversify their diets and livelihoods, 5) strengthen linkages to health and sanitation services, 6) integrate nutrition education and promotion, 7) scale up safety nets in times of crises.

The increasing international attention for nutrition-sensitive programming has been mainly driven by the 2013 Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition publication. This estimated that by scaling up nutrition-specific interventions in the 34 countries with the highest malnutrition incidence covering 90 percent of the population, global child stunting would be reduced by only 20 percent (Bhutta et al., 2013). Such findings clearly point to the need of complementary interventions to nutrition-specific actions in the fight against malnutrition. Nonetheless, the evidence on the effectiveness of NSP on nutrition outcomes is scarce (Olney et al., 2020). This has been attributed to weaknesses in design, implementation and evaluation of programmes. In particular, Leroy et al. (2016) point to some key challenges in evaluating NSP that can be summarized as: 1) the complexity of the coordination and integration of the programmes, because of their multisectoral approach, 2) the lengthy time required to affect chronic malnutrition constrained by the shorter time frames imposed by donors, 3) the misalignment of programme implementers and evaluators, given the practical challenges of the first in contrast with the independence and rigour of the second, 4) the difficulty in assessing benefits to a restricted group of beneficiaries, when NSPs tend to have a wider reach.

2.2 Shock-Responsive Social Protection for Nutrition

The need to leverage social protection systems for nutrition is identified by a wide range of sectoral organizations and movements, including Scaling Up for Nutrition (SUN), the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), the Comprehensive Framework for Action and the UN High Level Task Force on Global Food and Nutrition Security, which includes 11 organizations active in the field (FAO, 2023; Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2017, p.6). Social protection can be understood as “a broad category of policies and programmes to increase opportunity and enhance resilience to economic and natural shocks” (Alderman, 2015, p.5). Social protection addresses risks and shocks including 1) lifecycle risks such as old age, childhood, maternity, disability or incapacity to work, 2) health risks, 3) economic risks such as unemployment and price shocks, 4) natural and ecological risks, such as earthquakes or climate change-related disasters (GIZ, 2017, p.11). The recent push towards strengthening national social protection systems has been driven by the global food and financial crises of 2008 and the successes of conditional cash transfers (CCT) programmes in Latin America in the late 1990s (Freeland & Cherrier, 2015, p.4). If well designed social protection tools can ensure that the most vulnerable and poorest access adequate food and have a diversified and quality diet (GIZ, 2017).

Those who are most vulnerable to health and nutrition include pregnant and lactating women (PLW), children less than five years old, the elderly, people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and disabled people (FAO, 2015, p.17). While income transfers alone are often insufficient to impact nutrition (Alderman et al., 2013, p.23), when targeted to breastfeeding women and children in the first 1,000 days, social protection has the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and malnutrition (Freeland & Cherrier, 2015, p.9). In general, social protection recipients tend to increase their food intake, diet diversification and to reduce negative coping mechanisms that worsens their nutrition education and health in times of crisis (FAO, 2023). Indeed, the diverse social protection programmes can tackle the four dimensions of food security: 1) food availability, i.e. ensuring adequate availability of sufficient quantities of food, by boosting domestic production, 2) food access, i.e. ensuring access to adequate resources for acquiring nutritious food by increasing the poor’s income for instance, 3) food utilization, i.e. ensuring adequate diets, clean water, health care and sanitation through nutrition education by including Social and Behavioural Change Communication (SBCC) in the programmes, and finally 4) food stability, i.e. ensuring that households and individuals do “not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks (e.g. economic or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity)” (FAO, 2006; Slater, Holmes & Mathers, 2014, p.6), which is what shock-responsive social protection tackles.

Social protection is divided into ‘contributory’ and ‘non-contributory’, where the first refers to benefits allocated to beneficiaries that have paid into the scheme and the second one to benefits given to beneficiaries without them contributing to it. Additionally, non-contributory social

protection is divided into social assistance and social care, and contributory social protection is divided into social insurance and labour market policies. There are different modalities to carry out social assistance, which include 1) conditional and unconditional cash transfers, 2) vouchers (e.g. for food, medicine or livestock), 3) in-kind transfers (e.g. agricultural inputs or food, including school feeding programs), 4) public works programmes (cash or food exchanged for work), 5) education and health specific measures (e.g. fee waivers, health insurance, etc.), 6) subsidies (e.g. on food, fuel, inputs) (O'Brien et al., 2018, p.5). Food transfers have been increasingly substituted by cash transfers, because of the flexibility they give to the recipients to spend them according to their needs (Ruel & Alderman, 2013, p.6). Yet, this has meant that while evidence on cash transfers improvement of food security abounds, evidence on its effect on nutrition is scarce (Devereux & Nzabamwita, 2018).

Social protection systems can be particularly effective in times of shocks, preventing people in vulnerable situations from falling back into poverty and passing it on to the next generation (GIZ, 2017). Even though all social protection responds to shocks in some way, these are usually life cycle events (idiosyncratic shocks), while shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) refers to shocks affecting a large part of the population simultaneously (covariate shocks); SRSP can play a role ex-ante, i.e. emergency preparedness, or ex-post, i.e. response to emergency (O'Brien et al., 2018, p.7). Similar to this, social protection can be 1) preventive 2) protective, which correspond to ex-ante and ex-post SRSP, but also 3) promotive, when aimed at enhancing income or capabilities of people to alleviate them from poverty, or 4) transformative, when it addresses structural inequalities contributing to social justice and inclusion (FAO, 2015, p.7). SRSP can enhance resilience by preventing destitution, especially today that “climate change and the expected increased frequency of droughts and flooding are likely to reduce food availability and dietary diversity, and increase rates of infectious diseases such as diarrhoea or malaria” (Ruel & Alderman, 2013, p.2). Indeed, the increasing number and associated costs of food and climate crises occurring in Southern and Eastern Africa are driving a paradigm shift in how we deal with humanitarian crises, where social protection bridges the nexus between humanitarian assistance and development (DEVCO, ECHO & NEAR, 2019; GIZ, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2018, p.8).

While humanitarian aid is an uncertain answer to natural disasters, social protection schemes such as insurance can create predictive mechanisms to cope with shocks (GIZ, 2017, p.25). The question is then whether social protection programmes can also contribute along with humanitarian aid and disaster risk management (DRM) in ensuring that in the event of shocks, people are not pushed back into poverty, have enough food and adequate nutrition (O'Brien et al., 2018, p.8). Michal Rutkowski (2022) from the World Bank defines shock-responsive or adaptive social protection as “systems that can be scaled up and scaled down quickly. [...] Expansion can be horizontal, which means covering more people with social protection systems, or vertical, covering the same people more in depth, with higher benefits.” More precisely, O'Brien et al. (2018, pp.8–10) identifies five main ways of using social protection tools to respond to shocks: 1) design tweaks, i.e. making small adjustments to the design of regular social protection schemes, 2) piggybacking, i.e. using elements of an existing social protection scheme for a separate emergency response, 3) vertical expansion, i.e. increasing the

value or duration of the scheme, 4) horizontal expansion, i.e. increasing the number of beneficiaries of the scheme, 5) alignment, i.e. aligning social protection and humanitarian interventions with one another.

3 Country Profile: Malawi

On 12th March 2023 Tropical Cyclone Freddy made landfall in Malawi, leading to death, displacement and destruction. Today, the official death toll stands at 676 people and is expected to almost double, given that 538 people are still missing (Rédaction Africanews with AFP, 2023). “Access to nutritious food has been compromised, which could accelerate malnutrition at a time when children and pregnant and lactating women were already at risk due to previous shocks” (OCHA, 2023, p.1). A state of disaster has been declared in 14 districts, with over 500,000 people displaced and public infrastructure including schools, health facilities and roads damaged (ActionAid, 2023). Although Cyclone Freddy was unusual in some ways, having broken the record as the longest-lasting tropical cyclone ever registered (World Meteorological Organization [WMO], 2023), extreme climatic shocks are not the exception in Malawi, but rather the rule, making it a shock-prone country, ranking fifth in the world as most affected by shocks in 2019, according to the Global Climate Risk Index (Eckstein, Künzel & Schäfer, 2021, p.8).

Between 2003 and 2014, 20 out of 28 districts in Malawi experienced moderate to high recurrence of shocks such as floods and droughts, which resulted into serious impact on food security and malnutrition. For the past nine years an average of 1.73 million people has required humanitarian food assistance during the lean season. The historic peak was reached in the aftermath of El Niño in 2016/17, when 6.7 million people, corresponding to 36 percent of the population required humanitarian aid (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.9). Climate vulnerability in Malawi can be grouped into two main categories: seasonality and climate shocks (Holmes et al., 2017, p.1). The first refers to the seasonal food gaps periodically experienced in the same locations between October and March, during the so-called lean season, as a consequence of the agricultural calendar. This is the period between planting and harvest, when households (usually the same ones) do not produce or have enough food stocked (or income to buy it) to meet their nutritional needs throughout the year (UNICEF & WFP, 2022, p.11). Malawian households are particularly vulnerable to the agricultural calendar, given that the country’s agricultural produce depends on a single yearly rainy season, which therefore produces a single harvest per year (Devereux, 2009).

“The average household will produce about 10 months’ worth of food, of which it will sell half to meet immediate cash needs, and store the rest for consumption. By the time the household runs out of food, it will rely on low-paid agricultural work to buy food at higher prices.” (Holmes et al., 2017, p.16). Extreme climatic shocks, although also somewhat cyclical, refer to particularly damaging weather events whose strength and location cannot be precisely anticipated (De La Fuente, 2008). In Malawi, the most common arise from hydro-meteorological events, such as floods, dry spells, droughts and cyclones, but the country is also

hit by landslides, hot spells, and other indirectly climate-related events such as locust outbreaks, weevil infestations, malaria, cholera and dengue outbreaks (Holmes et al., 2017, p.27; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.3). Malawi is located in between two opposite modes of climate variability relative to El Niño and La Niña Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events. During El Niño, the northern region is at particular risk of unusual levels of rainfall, while the southern region is at risk of drought. These effects are reversed during La Niña (Holmes et al., 2017, p.17).

The high frequency of climatic shocks is preventing the Malawian economy from taking off, often exacerbating macroeconomic instability. As it is strongly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, Malawi is stuck in a cycle of poverty and vulnerability (World Bank, 2018a). The agricultural sector constitutes the backbone of the economy, accounting for 76 percent of all employment and 23 percent of GDP (World Bank Data, 2019a). Therefore, the performance of agriculture has direct implications for economic growth and poverty reduction in the country. The low productivity of the sector is coupled with highly volatile production and prices that result from the recurrent weather shocks (World Bank, 2018b). This is the reason why predictable resources that enable better coping with shocks are necessary to break the cycle between frequent disruptions, poverty and malnutrition (Chinsinga, 2007, p.11). In the last ten years, 15 out of 28 districts have been classified as food-insecure six times or more, with some being declared so for the whole period; their needs have been addressed through the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) humanitarian response (Holmes et al., 2017, p.12).

Malawi is a low-income country with 50.7 percent of the population living in poverty and 20.5 percent being “ultra-poor”, i.e. unable to meet food consumption needs (UNICEF & WFP, 2022, p.10). It ranks 169 out of 191 countries with a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.512 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). It is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, bordered by Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania. It has an estimated population of 18.6 million people and an annual growth rate of 2.9 percent (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.8). Besides the 15 years after independence, when Malawi’s economy grew relatively fast, the country has been stuck in a trend of weak economic performance compared to its neighbours, despite it being politically stable and conflict-free (World Bank, 2018a). As mentioned above, the economy is strongly dominated by the agricultural sector, where maize is the main crop, with the services sector accounting for almost all the remaining employment share and the industry sector only accounting for five percent of employment in the country (World Bank Data, 2019b).

Despite being above the African average (6 percent) in terms of wasting, with 2.6 of children under five wasted in Malawi, the nutrition situation looks less promising in terms of stunting, i.e. a child too short for its age because it is chronically malnourished, given that 35.5 percent of children under five in the country are stunted, above the African average of 30.7 percent (Global Nutrition Report, 2023). However, a large proportion of chronic and seasonal vulnerability of Malawi is known and predictable (Holmes et al., 2017, p.7). “The fact that the country has consistently high annual humanitarian need during the lean season implies that a

chronic problem is being addressed through an acute mechanism – the humanitarian response” (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.9). While social protection cannot and should not fully replace emergency response, an adequately developed social protection system that is responsive to shocks can reduce the need of emergency responses over time, which are costly and reactive in nature, lacking adequate attention to the preparatory and preventive side of building resilience to natural disasters (Holmes et al., 2017, p.9).

4 Previous Research

Despite the international attention attracted by the 2013 Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition publication, urging the need to scale-up nutrition-sensitive (NS) interventions to complement nutrition-specific actions (Bhutta et al., 2013), the current global evidence on the nutritional impacts of NSP remains limited. A number of individual studies show some positive effects on children exposed to NSP for long durations, but weak nutrition goals, inadequate targeted actions and poor service quality may motivate the scarcity of overall nutritional benefits (Ruel & Alderman, 2013). Similarly, Leroy, Olney and Ruel (2016, p.131) identify weaknesses in program design and implementation, as well as inadequate evaluation designs and methods as causes of the weak existing evidence. On this note, Alderman et al. (2013, p.23) find that income alone is insufficient to create nutritional benefits for the programme recipients, rather adequate nutrition elements, such as targeting women and nutritionally vulnerable groups, including a nutrition education component or a micronutrient supplementation package increases the likelihood of generating a positive nutritional impact. However, given the wide diversity of nutrition-sensitive programs, narrowing the focus down on one sector may be beneficial to find more accurate and detailed evidence.

4.1 Social Protection and Nutrition Evidence

On a general level, also the evidence on social protection programmes points to a number of necessary conditions needed to achieve positive impacts of nutrition, such as deliberately targeting social assistance to nutritional objectives and nutritionally vulnerable groups, or having an adequate transfer size and population coverage. For instance, Alderman (2013, p.100) finds female decision-making power over the income allocated through a transfer programme to be associated with higher expenditure for children's needs and, consequently, with an increased likelihood of improvements in the child nutrition. Slater et al. (2014, p.9) point to the need of an "integrated" approach of social assistance and nutrition, where transfers are explicitly linked to interventions that facilitate behavioural change, among others. In the context of shocks, others recommend to include a nutrition causal analysis for preparedness and emergency responses, beyond targeting nutritionally at-risk individuals (Technical Assistance to Strengthen Capabilities [TASC], 2021, p.7). But also, Devereux and Nzabamwita (2018, p.3) identify the low value of social transfers and under-coverage of poor people as a limiting factor of social protection programmes effects on nutritional outcomes.

Furthermore, while there seem to be a consensus on social protection transfers improving food consumption and expenditure, the evidence is mixed regarding whether there is a positive effect also on nutrition outcomes (Alderman, 2015, p.2; Slater, Holmes & Mathers, 2014, p.7). Given the heterogeneity of the evidence in this regard, looking at case studies may shed some light on the main findings. Through an analysis of the impact of the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) on child nutritional outcomes, Porter and Goyal (2016) find a positive medium-term nutritional impact on children aged 5-15 and that such impact is associated with improved food security and reduced child working hours. On the contrary, another study evaluating the fourth phase of the Ethiopian PSNP does not find any statistically significant effect of the programme on anthropometric measures of the beneficiaries (Berhane et al., 2020). Hoddinott, Ahmed and Roy (2018) find a positive effect of cash and food transfers, especially when accompanied by Behavioural Change Communication (BCC), on mother's nutritional knowledge and children (6-59 months old), consumption of micronutrient powders and other iron supplements.

By evaluating the effects of three different cash based interventions on nutritional outcomes in children under five in Sindh Province in Pakistan, Fenn et al. (2017) conclude that the effect on wasting at six months old tended to increase proportionally to the increase of transfers sizes; that regardless of the intervention modality, there was an impact on stunting that indicates a positive trend of nutrition resilience; that voucher cash assistance can have unintended effects on consumption and therefore needs to be carefully planned. Laar et al. (2017) confirm the theoretical underpinning that social protection can be an effective tool for improving nutrition, yet they argue that poor designing of social protection programme as standalone services that are not sufficiently integrated with nutritional objectives is the reason for limited results in the case study of Ghana. Finally, meta-analyses of recent literature (Bastagli & Lowe, 2021; De Groot et al., 2017; Manley et al., 2020) reach some common ground regarding the effectiveness of cash transfers on nutritional outcomes, thus further recommending the focus on such programmes for combating malnutrition.

4.2 Shock-Responsive Social Protection Evidence

Although studies identifying the increasing relevance of shock-responsive social protection can date back to 15 years ago (Davies et al., 2008, 2013), the literature on the topic has decisively increased in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak as well as a reaction to the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related extreme events. Beazley, Bischler and Doyle (2021) contributed to the research in the field through a cross-country analysis of how social protection schemes were adapted to respond to the covid-19 crisis. Examples included making advance lump-sum payments in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Uganda, temporarily suspending public works requirements in Ethiopia, adapting the modality of delivery in Kenya and Uganda (Beazley, Bischler & Doyle, 2021). They found that almost all countries increased the support provided to routine beneficiaries (vertical expansion) and implemented new

programmes to reach new beneficiaries, rather than horizontally expanding the existing ones; in general however, responses fell short compared to the scale of the shock (Beazley, Bischler & Doyle, 2021). Furthermore, Beazley, Bischler & Doyle (2021) and Hidrobo et al. (2020) draw attention on the need of gender considerations in the design of SRSP, in order to address rather than exacerbate existing inequalities.

An important research programme on six case studies led by the Oxford Policy Management has developed a guiding toolkit for understanding and analysing the use of social protection in response to shocks, aimed at minimizing the need for separate humanitarian assistance (O'Brien et al., 2018). Likewise, TASC (2021) provides a useful guidance note on the linkages between social assistance and nutrition, with one section specifically dedicated to the use of social protection for shock-responsiveness positively affecting nutrition. It identifies two main actions as essential for effective results: 1) to flexibly respond to changes in household income/and or food security and nutrition due to covariate shocks and that 2) preparedness and emergency response mechanisms are set up before a shock occurs and include nutritional considerations/indicators (TASC, 2021, p.18). A review of 43 evaluations and reports on humanitarian programmes since 2006 examines the available evidence on cash and vouchers interventions effect on food consumption, and finds that cash and vouchers tend to have a stronger effect on dietary diversity than food aid, while the latter was found to have better scores on diet quantity (Bailey & Hedlund, 2013).

A few case studies have examined the potential of social protection programmes in emergency or humanitarian settings on nutritional outcomes. Bliss et al. (2018) find that an emergency cash transfer programme in Niger has improved child weight gain and reduced the risk of acute malnutrition among children. Kurdi et al. (2019) find a significant positive impact of a cash transfer programme in Yemen on a range of intermediate outcomes, including improved knowledge and spending on food, and that it decreased the share of severe and moderate acute malnutrition among children. Doocy et al. (2020) investigated the impact of cash and voucher assistance in the context of a food crisis in Somalia and found no statistically significant effect in the difference between cash and voucher in reducing malnutrition. Finally, Maffioli et al. (2023) analysed the benefits of social protection programmes on food security and dietary diversity in Myanmar during a severe economic crisis and found positive effects of cash transfers combined with nutrition education one to two years after the programme was completed.

4.3 (Shock-Sensitive) Social Protection in Malawi

Research on the social protection programmes in Malawi and suggestions to their potential to contribute to shock-responsiveness and their linkages with nutrition can be traced back to almost two decades ago. Scholars were already drawing attention on the weak targeting to nutritionally vulnerable groups by national humanitarian assistance programmes (Devereux &

Macauslan, 2006) and on the chronic vulnerability to shocks that traps the country in a cycle of poverty and unstable growth, suggesting that it “requires [...] to mobilize predictable resources for predictable problems and challenges” (Chinsinga, 2007, p.11). After the growing commitment by the Malawian government to develop a shock-sensitive social protection system after the humanitarian crisis caused by El Niño events in 2016, in-depth programmes analyses and quantitative studies on the subject started to emerge. Gelli et al. (2017) carried out a longitudinal study based on two survey rounds in the Zomba district in Malawi to analyse the impact of the 2016 lean season food transfer on household food security, diet and nutrition outcomes of young children, for which they found positive effects. Eriksen et al. (2017) assessed the factors that contributed to the success of the Farm Input Support Programme (FISP) between 2005-2015: while this was successful in increasing production and food security, it failed to reduce longer term vulnerability and build resilience to serious flooding and droughts.

Handa et al. (2022) carried out a study of government impact evaluations (randomized controlled trials) of cash transfers in Sub-Saharan Africa and find Malawi to have the largest effect on food security and consumption, as well as livelihood strengthening and children’s well-being. Otchere et al. (2022) also investigate the impact of a cash transfer (the Social Cash Transfer Programme, locally known as the Mtukula Pakhomo) evaluation on the FAO resilience index, finding a positive impact. Their results indicate that regular and predictable cash transfers can increase resilience to future shocks, beyond increasing current consumption (Otchere & Handa, 2022). While the evidence on SRSP in Malawi is starting to grow, this is usually limited to Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) or micro-studies, given that national level macro-data are not available. Furthermore, given the current government’s adoption of shock-sensitive social protection on top of the national agenda, it is relevant to provide an updated analysis of the policy and programme environment of Malawi shock-responsive social protection system and its commitment to nutrition goals. This contributes to the literature by providing an updated review of the policy and programme environment on SRSP in Malawi, particularly significant and urgent today that the country is in dire need of responses mechanisms that prevent the increase of malnutrition as a result of Cyclone Freddy damages. Furthermore, past analyses have often focused on food consumption as an outcome variable, neglecting the importance of having nutrition-sensitive social protection, that has specific nutrition targets, going beyond the evaluation of food expenditure and consumption.

5 Research Design

The research design of the thesis is a qualitative case study. Case studies are beneficial for in-depth analysis of a programme, event, process or policy (Creswell, 2014, p.43). Furthermore, case studies implications are not limited to the case selected only, but are rather often externally valid, i.e. generalizable to other contexts, at least to some degree, by having wider intellectual relevance and addressing issues and concepts applicable to other countries (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p.214). Among the different functions that qualitative case studies can have, this thesis provides a descriptive contextualization (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p.215), where Malawi is chosen as a typical case useful to shed light on the wider international urge of using social protection systems as a complementary tool to respond to the increasing shocks worldwide and to prevent the increase of malnutrition (USP2030, 2022).

5.1 Data and Methodology

The thesis uses qualitative data. This includes policy and programme documents and a range of secondary data including international organizations reports, government reports and academic articles. The analysis is focused on the time-frame starting from El Niño responses in 2016/17 until today, a moment that represents a critical juncture for the prioritization and use of SRSP in Malawi. Therefore, the thesis explores the overarching research question “*How shock-responsive and nutrition-sensitive is the social protection system in Malawi?*” through a descriptive qualitative analysis. Furthermore, three sub-research questions are developed to reflect the three main areas of analysis:

1. *What are the concrete experiences of Malawi in terms of shock-responsive social-protection since the response to El Niño in 2016/17?*
2. *What are the modalities through which social protection systems in Malawi were adapted to respond to shocks since the response to El Niño in 2016/17?*
3. *To what extent are social protection programmes in Malawi, including their shock-responsive components, sensitive to nutrition?*

To respond to the first question, the analysis proceeds by reviewing primary and secondary literature related to the regulatory framework and past experiences of shock-responsive social protection in Malawi, aimed at capturing a general overview of the existing social protection policies and programmes in the country and the past experiences of Malawi in terms of SRSP, to inform future policy making and programme designs. Then, the thesis analyses the second question by evaluating under which modality of the five identified by **O’Brien (2018, pp.8–12)**, social protection programs have been/are designed/scaled-up/refined to enable shock

responsiveness. Although this was briefly presented in the theoretical approach section, more information is here provided regarding each SRSP modality:

- 1. Design tweaks:** “The design of social protection programmes and systems can be adjusted in a way that takes into consideration the crises that a country typically faces” (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.8). They have the advantage of ensuring regular social protection service to the usual beneficiaries, while introducing the necessary flexibility to adapt to disruptions due to shocks. Examples of tweaks include allowing people to receive cash over the counter if usual electronic payment does not work, or exempting beneficiaries from respecting conditionalities (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.8).
- 2. Piggybacking:** “Occurs when an emergency response, delivered by either government or its partners, uses part of an established social protection system or programme while delivering something new” (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.9). This can be done to specific programmes or to the underlying delivery systems of it. Examples of elements that could change are a specific programme’s beneficiary list, its staff, a national database or a particular payment mechanism. The idea is to use something that is already in place, rather than starting from scratch (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.9).
- 3. Vertical expansion:** “Following a shock [...] the benefit value or duration of the programme is temporarily increased for some or all existing recipients (top-ups)” (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.9). Although this may seem similar to piggybacking on the beneficiary list, vertical expansion differs by being an integral part of the existing programme, using the same implementers, delivery systems and name. This refers to scaling-up a specific programme, rather than borrowing an element of it (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.9).
- 4. Horizontal expansion:** “The temporary inclusion of new beneficiaries from disaster-affected communities” (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.9). This can be done by expanding the geographical reach of the programme, expanding the coverage in the same geographical areas where the programme already operates, or modifying the eligibility criteria for the inclusion of new beneficiaries. Successful experiences of horizontal expansions are programmes that were already designed for allowing for this option, rather than adding it after a disaster. The operation is easier if the extra beneficiaries are pre-selected as potentially prone to shocks (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.9).
- 5. Alignment:** “The development of one or more elements of a parallel humanitarian response that align as best as possible with those used in a current or possible future social protection programme or DRM system” (O’Brien et al., 2018, p.10). It can refer to aligning objectives, targeting method, transfer value or delivery system, by using parallel infrastructure (differently from piggybacking). This contributes to ensuring sustainability and can still relieve some pressure from humanitarian assistance, if alternative funding is available.

Finally, the third sub-research question is analysed by using the **FAO (2015, pp.11–12)** “Key principles for making social protection more nutrition-sensitive”. Nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes must:

- 1. Target the nutritionally vulnerable:** While targeting of social protection programmes is based on socio-economic criteria, nutrition-sensitive programmes need to add a

nutrition lens. Nutritionally vulnerable individuals are children between 6 and 23 months, pregnant and lactating women, orphans, people living with HIV/AIDS, sick people and the elderly. Moreover, to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and poverty it is crucial to target women in reproductive age and children in the first 1,000 days of their life (FAO, 2015, p.11).

- 2. Incorporate explicit nutrition objectives and indicators:** Given that the achievement of nutrition goals through social protection is not automatic, not being its primary objective, nutrition objectives and indicators must be clearly stated, also to enable accurate monitoring and evaluation (FAO, 2015, p.11).
- 3. Empower women and make them recipients of social protection benefits:** Addressing women specifically is important to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. This can be done by increasing their access to education, assets and resources, considering their disproportionate workload and time constraint, which is based on ample research that finds that women tend to spend more resources in favour of the health and nutrition of the household (FAO, 2015, p.12).
- 4. Promote strategies that enable households to diversify their diets and livelihoods:** Going beyond access to simple stable food, nutrition needs people to have access to a diversified and safe diet, including micronutrient supplements when needed, and diversified livelihoods, such as through the provision of livestock (FAO, 2015, p.12).
- 5. Strengthen linkages to health and sanitation services:** To achieve good nutrition, health objectives need to be included to improve access to quality health and sanitation services (FAO, 2015, p.12).
- 6. Integrate nutrition education and promotion:** Malnutrition is not always caused by a lack of income, but also by a lack of information. Appropriate knowledge transfers are needed to ensure that beneficiaries spend the money they receive from the programmes on appropriate food purchases and health services (FAO, 2015, p.12).
- 7. Scale up safety nets in times of crises:** the acute and long-term effects of shocks are reduced if existing social protection systems are structured to be expanded and adapted in a timely manner (FAO, 2015, p.12).

5.2 Limitations

The choice of the methodology was motivated by two main reasons. First, the necessary data to carry out any type of quantitative analysis on the topic were not available online or publicly accessible. This becomes clear also from looking at the existing literature, given that all the quantitative studies on the subject use primary data collected by the authors over a considerable period of time. The qualitative studies then are divided into those that use expert interviews as primary data and those that make an analysis of the literature and existing documents, which is what this thesis does, adding to the existing literature by analysing recent developments of shock-responsive social protection in Malawi. The thesis does so in an innovative way: by using the O'Brien (2018) framework to analyse the modality used for SRSP and by using the FAO (2015) framework to analyse to what extent social protection programmes are designed to address malnutrition. Second, the choice was driven by the appropriateness of using qualitative

methods to analyse policies and programmes. Descriptive qualitative analysis is suitable to explore and understand a topic in depth, in all its nuances allowing to capture the whole picture in a holistic manner, especially when a topic is new (Creswell, 2014, p.235).

However, some limitations of the type of analysis and the correspondent data used for the thesis are acknowledged and discussed here. First, the findings reported are limited to the documents available online, which not always correspond to the most recent developments in the country, given that insiders' information is missing, something that can instead be captured through expert interviews or key informants' interviews. Second, case study qualitative research faces the risk the of being prone to the researcher's subjectivity and can be limited in terms of external validity (Mwita, 2022). Finally, while the analysis of policy documents and official reports with the support of academic articles facilitates a holistic understanding of the subject under study, it limits the analysis to being descriptive, failing to provide any type of causal inferential analysis. While descriptive analysis is still a valid method, that contributes to the literature by enhancing the understanding of the field under study, differently from explanatory research, it is limited in terms of contributing to new policy prescriptions (Creswell, 2014, p.192).

6 Empirical Analysis

The overall guidance in terms of social protection in Malawi is provided by the Poverty Reduction and Social Protection Division within the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development. The implementation of social protection programmes is divided among the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the National Government Finance Committee (UNICEF & WFP, 2022, p.12). Table 1 summarizes the main national policies in relation to shock-responsive social protection in Malawi.

Table 1. Summary of Malawi national policies relevant for shock-responsive social protection

Policy Name	Time-Frame	Description
Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) III	2017-2022	Overarching national development policy
National Social Support Policy (NSSP)	2012-2016	Overarching policy instrument guiding national social protection
Malawi National Social Support Programme (MNSSP II)	2018-2023	Guiding national implementation programme on social protection, operationalizes NSSP
National Resilience Strategy	2018-2030	National policy for addressing poverty reduction, food and nutrition security and inclusive and resilient growth for all Malawians
Malawi Vision 2063 (MW2063)	2020-2063	Strategic national vision that aims to transform Malawi into an industrialized upper-middle income country by 2063

The pressure to innovate in addressing chronic and acute food insecurity and poverty at scale in Malawi became particularly prominent during El Niño response of 2016/17. This, coupled with the 2015 ‘Breaking the Cycle of Hunger’ agenda that involved a series of discussions between the Malawian government and development partners, led to the rise of shock-sensitive social protection at the top of the national agenda, then followed by a series of SRSP trials (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.9). The Malawian government has made shock-sensitive social protection a national priority, reflected in all major national policies. The latest available overarching national development policy, the Malawi Growth and Development

Strategy III (MGDS) 2017-2022, identifies “Agriculture, Water Development and Climate Change Management” as the first of its five key priority areas (Government of Malawi, 2017, p.xvii). The achievement of it is operationalized through a set of corresponding outcomes and actions, set forward in the Malawi national Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework. Among the actions identified to reach priority area 1, the MGDS III states the need to “scale-up social protection programs to cater for the most vulnerable food insecure households” (Government of Malawi, 2017, p.99). While the National Social Support Policy (NSSP) 2012-2016 recognizes frequent shocks as a key driver of poverty and vulnerability throughout the document, it does not operationalize it into a clear policy objective (Republic of Malawi, 2009). Yet, because this is now an outdated document, which is currently under revision, it is more relevant to analyse the Malawi National Social Support Programme (MNSSP II) 2018-2023 in this regard (Joint SDG Fund, 2021).

Indeed, the MNSSP II identifies as its third pillar the need to develop “a shock-sensitive social protection system that meets seasonal needs, prepares for and responds to unpredictable shocks together with the humanitarian sector, and supports recovery and the return to regular programming” (Republic of Malawi, 2018, p.ii). Shock-sensitive social protection in Malawi is defined as “a system that helps people prepare for, cope with, and respond to shocks, through the closer alignment of humanitarian and development actors and systems” (Shock-Responsive Social Protection Panel, 2016). Furthermore, the National Resilience Strategy 2018-2030 refers to scalable social assistance programmes for shocks response and it reflects SRSP in two of its four main pillars (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.10). These are Pillar 2: “Risk Reduction, Flood Control, and Early Warning and Response Systems” and Pillar 3: “Human Capacity, Livelihoods and Social Protection” (Government of Malawi, 2018a, p.35). However, the linkage of these pillars towards an effective SRSP remains theoretical, as an implementation plan has not been approved yet (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.10). Finally, Malawi Vision 2063 recognizes the need to “improve the shock sensitivity of the social protection system for the poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups by stimulating their ability to prepare for, cope with and adapt to shocks” (National Planning Commission, 2020, p.36).

Moving to the operationalization of social protection policies, Malawi’s main social assistance programmes are 1) the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP), 2) the Public Works Programme (PWP) and 3) School Meal Programmes (SMPs). Table 2 summarizes them.

Table 2. Summary of main social assistance programmes in Malawi

Programme Name	Time-frame	Description
Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) or Mtukula Pakhomo	2006-present	Targeted to the ultra-poor, labour-constrained households
Public Works Programme (PWP)	1996-present	Targeted to the ultra-poor households, with labour capacity
School Meal Programmes (SMPs)	1999-present	Food assistance for school-going children

The Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) provides unconditional monthly cash payments to the 10 percent most vulnerable and ultra-poor labour-constrained households of each district in the country (Government of Malawi, 2022b). Under the SCTP, a household is classified as ultra-poor when it eats one meal per day, it survives from begging, is undernourished, it does not possess any valuable asset, it does not receive any monetary help, food or gifts from others (Mtukula Pakhomo, 2023). A household is classified as labour-constrained when it has a minimum ratio of 3:1 unfit to work members, which include the elderly, children, adolescents still in school and people with disability (Mtukula Pakhomo, 2023). Also known as Mtukula Pakhomo (“lifting up households” in Chichewa language), it provides an average of 9,000 Malawian Kwacha, the equivalent of 10 dollars per month, to over 1.3 million people, which they can spend as they wish (Government of Malawi, 2022c). Evidence, however, shows that the most common purchases are food, livestock and agricultural inputs, but also school fees and school equipment (Government of Malawi, 2022c).

Since it was first started in 2006 it has evolved, including introducing a harmonized electronic payments system, improving its Management and Information System (MIS) and the “coordination between social protection and humanitarian actors to leverage the SCTP system in response to seasonal variations and emergencies” (Government of Malawi, 2022c). In fact, the second of the five key goals set forward by the SCTP Strategic Plan 2022-2027 is to “improve the sensitivity of the programme to vulnerabilities across the lifecycle, predictable seasonal deprivations, and unanticipated climate-related and other shocks” (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.vii), which identifies three sub-actions: 1) the need to target specific vulnerable categories, 2) contingency financing mechanisms for the areas that face regular seasonal food security crises, and 3) the expansion of a shock-sensitive SCTP vertically and horizontally (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.vii).

In line with the SCTP Strategic Plan, the World Bank has recently started funding a government-led scalability pilot of the SCTP to increase its reach in the event of climate shocks, initially prioritizing droughts. The scalability mechanism activates early action following a dual trigger: the first one monitors rainfall through remote sensing and the second one is based on an evidence review on food insecurity, agricultural production and food prices (Calcutt, 2023). It relies on pre-agreed and already in place financing, i.e. through digital payment accounts, and targeting of vulnerable households (Choularton et al., 2023, p.3). The first trial of implementation was activated in 2021/22 in the context of failed planting in several areas due to late rainfall that was followed by a series of cyclones and macroeconomic instability in the country, when the scale-up of the STCP system allowed to provide assistance to 74,000 households in three districts (Choularton et al., 2023, p.3). In 2022/23 the mechanism has been expanded to cover over 100,000 households in six districts, with the long-term aim to have a national coverage (World Bank, 2023, p.2).

Aside from the recent SRSP trials, Malawi’s main mechanism to address seasonality and climatic shocks is based on seasonal assessments. The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC), which sits within the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, conducts bi-annual assessments (post-harvest and pre-lean season) to assess food

security and livelihood vulnerability for early-warning information, producing an estimate of the population at risk in terms of food security and nutrition in the coming lean season (Holmes et al., 2017, p.25; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.12). Since 2017 this information contributes to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, the Nutrition Survey and Food Security Reports among others (Holmes et al., 2017, p.55). Based on the MVAC assessment, the Department of Disaster Risk Management Affairs, which sits within the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security, coordinates the so-called ‘MVAC response’ through the Humanitarian Response Committee (Holmes et al., 2017, p.25; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.12). “As such, humanitarian action and disaster response are somewhat indistinguishable from the annual, seasonal response to food insecurity” (Holmes et al., 2017, p.25). However, social protection started to play a role when in the 2016/17 El Niño response, SCTP beneficiaries in one district automatically received also the MVAC response, and SCTP beneficiaries in another affected district received emergency top-ups, representing the first time that the SCTP was used for shock-responsiveness (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, pp.15–17).

Another trial of a SCTP scale-up occurred in response to the socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021. Taking advantage of the know-how and infrastructure of the STCP, the Government of Malawi successfully rolled out the Covid-19 Urban Cash Intervention (CUCI) (Government of Malawi, 2022c). The programme targeted 35 percent of the poorest population of the cities Lilongwe (the country’s capital), Blantyre, Zomba and Mzuzu to whom it was transferred the equivalent of 45 dollars, corresponding to the minimum wage at the time, for a total of three months (Varghese Boban et al., 2021, p.7). Furthermore, while the SCTP accounts for the majority of the social protection budget, especially since 2018 when the Public Works Programme (PWP) was scaled down substantially (UNICEF, 2021, p.13), the other programmes also present relevant experiences in terms of shock-sensitivity. As the oldest social protection programme in the country, the PWP operates under the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) and was first implemented by the Local Development Fund (LDF) in 1996 (Beierl & Dodlova, 2022). It has a nation-wide coverage and the allocation of funds per district is proportional to each district’s population, poverty rates and other vulnerability measures (Beegle, Galasso & Goldberg, 2017). In the context of the 2016/17 emergency response, the PWP extended the number of days that beneficiaries were allowed to work (and consequently to receive cash in exchange) and sped up a planned coverage expansion (Holmes et al., 2017, p.30).

Likewise, School Meals Programmes (SMPs) in Malawi have some experience in terms of shock-sensitivity. First started in 1999, today there are different SMPs in Malawi covering about 35 percent of school going children, with the main providers being the charity Mary’s Meals, the WFP, and the Government of Malawi (Government of Malawi, 2016; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.15). Despite the high enrolment rates, Malawi has one of the highest drop-out rates in Southern Africa, with 11 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys dropping out of school between grade five and grade eight (Nanchukwa & Mphande, 2015). It was also in 2016/17 that SMPs first adapted their criteria according to the emergency situation: schools’

coverage was expanded and take-home rations were added to school meals. During the lean season take-home rations provision was then extended to girls and orphan boys in upper grades to encourage them to keep going to school (Babu et al., 2018, p.43; WFP, 2016, 2019, p.20).

Finally, in addition to the SCTP, the PWP and the SMPs, the MNSSP II (the guiding document for the implementation of national social protection programmes) also mentions Saving and Loan Groups and Microfinance institutions as part of the main social protection programmes in the country (Republic of Malawi, 2018). In particular, it envisages three main actions for how these can contribute to shock-responsiveness, namely by i) promoting savings to increase resilience to shocks, by ii) adapting trainings and activities to promote share-outs during times of increased need to smoothen consumption, and by iii) adapting micro-finance institutions services, products and assistance provided, to help households use them to manage risks (Republic of Malawi, 2018, p.20). However, not being social assistance programmes, but a fragmented landscape of independent institutions, their shock-responsiveness is not something that can be directed on a large-scale by the government and therefore it is not suitable for this type of analysis (Van de Meerendonk et al., 2016).

Finally, the Malawian government has been expanding its integrated social registry, known as the Unified Beneficiary Registry (UBR) with the aim of reaching a coverage of 100 percent of households. Although the planned shift was mentioned by Lindert et al. (2018), no information more up to date was found online to confirm or disprove whether this has been done. This is a unified MIS designed to enable targeting and registration processes of all social assistance programmes beneficiaries at the national level, recording who is benefiting from what programme and where, for the purpose of avoiding duplication and producing an overall picture (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.18). Lindert et al. (2018) recommend updating regularly (prioritizing shock-prone areas) the UBR for serving more adequately the deployment of shock-sensitive safety nets.

6.1 Shock-Responsiveness Modalities

The emergency response to the effects of El Niño in 2016/17 represents the first instance of scaling-up social protection for shock-responsiveness in Malawi (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.15). The Southern African region had been strongly hit by a series of crises in 2014/15 and in 2015/16 including scarce harvests and extensive flooding, which created a national deficit of one million metric tons and a 60 percent increase in domestic maize prices (Babu et al., 2018). In Mchinji district, 56 households that were regular SCTP beneficiaries kept receiving bi-monthly transfers as part of the programme but also received an additional top-up monthly MVAC cash transfer, which is significantly larger; using a piggybacking technique, SCTP beneficiaries were automatically included in the MVAC response in drought-affected areas (Holmes et al., 2017, p.41; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.15). In the same context, emergency top-ups were provided to about 3,000 drought-affected households in

the Balaka district who were beneficiaries of the SCTP, signalling a first trial of shock-responsiveness through vertical expansion (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.17).

Still during the El Niño response, other national social protection programmes were leveraged to respond to the emergency needs. Both the PWP and the SMPs expanded coverage of their beneficiaries, i.e. expanded horizontally, and carried out some sort of design tweak: the PWP temporarily changed its conditions, increasing the allowed number of days that beneficiaries could work, and the SMPs added take-home rations to the programmes (Holmes et al., 2017, p.30,41; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.16). Then, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the government implemented another vertical expansion of the SCTP for a period of three months (UNICEF, 2021, p.17). Finally, the World Bank funded, government-led scalability SCTP pilot, which provided emergency assistance through SRSP in the context of the dry spell of 2021/22, is designed to include both a vertical and a horizontal expansion of the programme (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.17). Every year, to help poor families cope with the lean season, the SCTP is set to vertically expand, providing enrolled beneficiaries top-ups for the season, but also to horizontally expand, by including additional beneficiaries for the season (Government of Malawi, 2022c). To ensure effective and timely action, the scale-up of the SCTP, in either modality, will make use of existing payment methods, using pre-agreed transfer amounts (Government of Malawi & World Bank, 2022, p.3).

6.2 Nutrition-Sensitive Checklist

The Malawi National Multi-Sector Nutrition Policy (NMNP) 2018-2022 and the corresponding National Multi-Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan (NMNSP) 2018-2022 acknowledge that “adequate nutrition is a prerequisite for human growth and development, as it plays an important role in one’s physical and intellectual development, and consequentially work productivity” (Government of Malawi, 2018b, p.i). They identify “Nutrition during emergency situations” as the sixth of eight priority areas, drawing attention on the implications that the high frequency of climatic shocks has on the Malawian population, predominantly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, making it vulnerable to infectious diseases and malnutrition (Government of Malawi, 2018b, p.26). Moreover, the inclusion of vulnerable households into social protection schemes is listed as one of the key strategic actions under priority six in the NMNSP (Government of Malawi, 2018c, p.41).

Yet, while the nutrition regulatory framework highlights the importance of nutrition-sensitive interventions, it does so especially by looking at the agricultural sector, only briefly mentioning the role of social protection throughout the documents; despite their publication was contemporaneous, the MNSSP II is barely mentioned in the nutrition multi-sectoral approach outline (Government of Malawi, 2018c, p.8, 2018b, p.7). On the other hand, the MDGS III 2017-2022, the overarching national development policy, identifies the need to “scale-up social protection programmes to cater for the most vulnerable food insecure households” as a key contributing action to the achievement of the Priority Area “Agriculture, Water Development

and Climate Change Management (Government of Malawi, 2017, p.99). Moreover, within the national M&E framework, this action has been placed under the outcome “Improved nutrition and food security” and under the output “foster adequate market supply of diverse and nutritious foods” (Government of Malawi, 2017, p.99).

Moving on to the analysis of the single social assistance programmes in terms of nutrition-sensitivity, the SCTP identifies nutrition as one of its main objectives (UNICEF, 2021, p.7). This is, indeed, mentioned in both of the general objectives of the programme, namely i) to reduce poverty, hunger and starvation in all households which are ultra-poor and at the same time labour constrained and ii) to increase school enrolment and improve the health and nutrition of children living in target group households (Mtukula Pakhomo, 2023). The SCTP targets the 10 percent poorest and labour constrained households of all the 28 districts. Labour-constrained refers to those that are younger than 18 and older than 64, between 19 and 25 still going to school, those who have a disability or suffer from a chronic illness. Among the criteria that define a household as ultra-poor there is “the household is undernourished”. Furthermore, it provides a small educational bonus for households with children between 6 and 24 to help support school attendance. Finally, the website talks about a categorical simpler targeting pilot planned to take place in Thyolo district, where the targeted categories will be households including: individuals under five; the elderly, above 70; pregnant and lactating women (Mtukula Pakhomo, 2023).

From the analysis it emerges that the SCTP partially complies with the requirement of targeting nutritionally vulnerable groups, by targeting households with sick people, the elderly and orphans given that these are considered as labour-constrained. Yet, while it targets the 10 percent poorest households of each district, the ultra-poverty rate varies from less than 3 percent to over 30 percent across the different districts, thus creating spatial inequities (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.5). Furthermore, children under five are not adequately targeted, with UNICEF (2021, pp.8–9) reporting that “among the rural ultra-poor 16 percent of households members are children under the age of five, compared to just 8 percent among SCTP households”. Likewise, the demographic pyramids of the SCTP coverage and the Malawi ultra-poor disaggregated by sex shows a disparity of the amount of ultra-poor female population and the percentage covered by the programme (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.6). In terms of ensuring diversified diets and livelihoods, in terms of strengthening the linkage with health and sanitation services, and in terms of integrating nutrition education, at the moment the SCTP design has no reference to them, which however is not surprising being an unconditional cash transfer programme. Yet, the 2022-2027 SCTP Strategic Plan discusses a planned package provision comprehensive of complementary services, including awareness-raising on health, education, nutrition, savings, basic health screening and financial literacy training, that beneficiaries will be encouraged to undertake (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.19).

Unfortunately, the information regarding the PWP is not as accessible as the one for the SCTP, making it difficult to analyse it in-depth in terms of nutrition-sensitivity. However, something could be retrieved from the findings of Beegle et al. (2017) randomized controlled trial. Despite the objectives of the programme being the improvement of food security and the increase of the use of fertilizer and other agricultural inputs, no evidence was found about the programme improving food security during the lean season, measured through eight indicators also

capturing nutrition status (Beegle, Galasso & Goldberg, 2017). However, the study used data from 2013, which thus may have different results today.

Finally, SMPs do clearly incorporate improved nutrition as one of their main objectives, along with increased school participation and pupil's ability to concentrate (Government of Malawi, 2016, p.2). Likewise, they target school going children, which are one of the main nutritionally vulnerable groups and in addition, the WFP provides take-home rations to orphans during the lean season, conditionally on 80 percent school attendance (Government of Malawi, 2016, p.2). However, they do not seem to specifically target women, for instance through a specific targeting or additional top-ups for women-headed households. Yet, some SMPs contribute to diets diversification and some others to livelihoods diversification. In relation to the first, WFP and Mary's Meals serve fortified corn-soya porridge in all schools (Government of Malawi, 2016, p.2; Nanchukwa & Mphande, 2015), relying on the widely agreed evidence that fortified food contributes to the reduction of micronutrient deficiencies (Bhutta, Salam & Das, 2013). In relation to the second one, the Government of Malawi and WFP are currently implementing home-grown school feeding programmes, which refer to the production of schools meals through local farmers, in some cases directly on the school premises (WFP, 2021b). However, tailored nutrition education is missing (Emergency Nutrition Network, 2023) as well as linkages to health and sanitation services. To conclude, in terms of the last dimension of the nutrition-sensitive social protection checklist, namely programmes scalability in times of crises, the previous section has discussed how all the three main programmes have started to do some trials in this regard.

6.3 Discussion

Recalling the research purpose, the aim of the thesis was to explore the role of social protection systems in terms of shock-responsiveness and good nutrition. The analysis of the case study of Malawi, a shock-prone country with over one third of children under five being stunted (Global Nutrition Report, 2023) yielded promising results in terms of a growing use of shock-responsive social protection in the context of climatic shocks and seasonal scarcity, but limited results in terms of the degree of nutrition-sensitivity of the social protection system. The Government of Malawi has taken important steps towards the development of a shock-responsive social protection system, that leverages the existing infrastructure of regular programmes for scaling-up or adapting to the needs of the population in emergency contexts. The damages of El Niño acted as a wake-up call for the country's need to complement the frequent and growing needs of humanitarian assistance, due to shocks and seasonality (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019). The MGDS III and the MNSSP II identify shock-sensitive social protection as a key priority to address the nutritional vulnerabilities resulting from the recurrent shocks, which are currently trapping the country in a cycle of poverty and hunger (Government of Malawi, 2017; Republic of Malawi, 2018). This has been translated into action through several trials carried out in the past decade that saw all the three major social protection programmes in the country adapting or scaling-up to respond to humanitarian emergencies.

The SCTP, the unconditional cash transfer programme accounting for the majority of the social protection budget in the country, has been adapted in three different occasions up to today. Its infrastructure has been first leveraged in response to El Niño in 2016/17, when through piggybacking all SCTP beneficiaries were automatically included as beneficiaries of the MVAC emergency response in Mchinji district and top-ups were provided to SCTP beneficiaries in Balaka district, vertically expanding the programme (Holmes et al., 2017, p.41; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.15). In 2021, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the SCTP was again vertically expanded for a period of three months (UNICEF, 2021, p.17). Finally, addressing the 2021/22 lean season the SCTP was both vertically and horizontally expanded (Government of Malawi, 2022c). Likewise, both the PWP and the SMPs leveraged their already in place structures to respond to El Niño in 2016/17, by horizontally expanding and doing some design tweaks, with the PWP temporarily changing its conditions and the SMPs adding take-home rations (Holmes et al., 2017, p.30,41; Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019, p.16). The case study of Malawi thus has implemented shock-responsive social protection in four of the five modalities identified by O'Brien (2018, pp.8–12), showing that different modalities can be leveraged in different contexts, depending on the specific needs.

On the other hand, the social protection system in Malawi was found to be only partially sensitive to nutrition. Going back to the literature, this becomes worrying, given that fighting malnutrition requires actions that go beyond those directly addressed to it, i.e. nutrition-specific; other sectors such as social protection have the potential to affect the underlying causes of malnutrition, if they are properly designed in a nutrition-sensitive way (Bhutta et al., 2013; FAO, 2015). On a positive note, all three major programmes incorporate improved nutrition as one of their main objectives (Beegle, Galasso & Goldberg, 2017; Government of Malawi, 2016, p.2; UNICEF, 2021, p.7). However, while the information in relation to the PWP is scarce in this regard, the SMPs seems to adequately target nutritionally vulnerable groups (Government of Malawi, 2016, p.2), while the SCTP partially does so, with an insufficient coverage of children under five (2021, pp.8–9). Across all programmes, however, women are not adequately targeted as recipients of social protection benefits, despite the literature highlighting the potential of pregnant and lactating women to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and the tendency of women to spend more and care more for the food and nutrition needs of the family (WFP, 2018).

In terms of diets and livelihood diversification, linkages to health and sanitation services and nutrition education, although the SCTP has no special provision for it at the moment, there is a planned introduction of a package inclusive of nutrition education and linkages to a series of services, both aimed at improving health and sanitation and at the diversification of livelihoods (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.19). While for the PWP no adequate information was again available in this regard, SMPs were found to be addressing diversification of diets in some cases (through the provision of fortified food to school going children) and to the diversification of livelihoods in other cases (through the home-grown school feeding programmes) (Government of Malawi, 2016, p.2; WFP, 2021b). Yet, linkages to health and sanitation services and nutrition education are not adequately addressed by the programmes (Emergency Nutrition Network, 2023).

7 Conclusion

“The largest global food crisis in modern history is unfolding, driven by conflict, climate shocks and the looming threat of global recession” (OCHA, 2022, p.4). Climate change is contributing to the escalation of humanitarian crisis worldwide, with 12 out of the 15 most vulnerable countries to climate change having had an internationally-led humanitarian response in 2022 (OCHA, 2022, p.4). One in every 23 people is projected to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023, with East and Southern Africa having the largest number of people in need, amounting to 76.8 million (OCHA, 2022, p.5). Over the last few decades, Southern Africa has been facing one crisis after another, following a vicious cycle of humanitarian response and recovery (WFP, 2021c). Governments worldwide have leveraged their social protection systems in an unprecedented scale in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, yielding important lessons for how adaptive social protection systems can help bridge the humanitarian-development nexus contributing to resilience-building to shocks (Bastagli & Lowe, 2021; Beazley, Bischler & Doyle, 2021; WFP, 2021c).

Those who are already poor are highly vulnerable to even small shocks that can push them further into poverty, starvation, malnourishment or even mortality (Committee on World Food Security, 2014). Seasonal food scarcity and climate shocks can induce already vulnerable people into a food and nutrition crisis (WFP, 2017). As Bhutta et al. (2013) found nutrition-sensitive interventions, i.e. those that address malnutrition indirectly through other sectors such as social protection, are necessary to complement the efforts of nutrition-specific interventions, which alone cannot eliminate global malnutrition. Malawi ranked fifth out of the ten most affected countries by extreme weather events in 2019 (Eckstein, Künzel & Schäfer, 2021), has experienced more than 19 major floods and seven droughts over the past 50 years (Government of Malawi, 2019) and between 2010 and 2019 an average of 10 percent of its population received humanitarian assistance every year (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.14). On 12th March 2023 the country was hit by Tropical Cyclone Freddy which caused the death of more than a thousand people (Rédaction Africanews with AFP, 2023). More than one every three children under five is stunted in Malawi, surpassing the African average (Global Nutrition Report, 2023). In this context, where a large proportion of chronic and seasonal vulnerability of the country is known and predictable (Government of Malawi, 2022a, p.15; Holmes et al., 2017, p.7), the Government of Malawi has recognized the need to make shock-sensitive social protection as a national priority to address food and nutrition security (Government of Malawi, 2017; Republic of Malawi, 2018; UNICEF & WFP, 2022, p.6).

Over the past seven years, many pilots have been carried out to systematically test and roll-out different aspects of shock-sensitive social protection in the country. Building its capacity over the years, the government has been able to address both slow and fast onset shocks, by increasingly leveraging its social protection system (Government of Malawi, 2022c, p.17). The three main social protection programmes have been leveraged and adapted to the needs emerged

as a result of shocks. Depending on the situation, they have been adapted through vertical expansion, i.e. providing top-ups to their usual beneficiaries, horizontal expansion, i.e. temporarily expanding their beneficiaries list, piggybacking, i.e. using an element of a social protection programme for emergency response, and by making design tweaks, i.e. adjusting the conditions of a programme. They used four of the five modalities identified by O'Brien (2018, pp.8–12) for leveraging social protection for shock-responsiveness. Yet, the social protection programmes in Malawi are not adequately designed in a nutrition-sensitive way, holding worrying implications in terms of combating malnutrition in the country and preventing its escalation in the aftermath of shocks (FAO, 2015). Although all the major national social assistance programmes seem to incorporate improved nutrition as one of their main objectives, nutritionally vulnerable groups are only partially targeted, women are not directly targeted and diets and livelihood diversification, linkages to health and sanitation services and nutrition education are almost absent from all the programmes designs. Weakness in programme design indeed reflects one of the causes identified by Leroy, Olney and Ruel (2016, p.131) for the scarce available evidence on reducing malnutrition through nutrition-sensitive programmes.

7.1 Practical Implications and Future Research

The thesis results lead to important policy implications, also in light of the current response to the devastation of Tropical Cyclone Freddy. Despite the promising developments of the past decade in terms of using social protection to respond to recurrent shocks in Malawi, the government needs to increase the effort of scaling up the use of social protection in response to shocks, to effectively implement large-scale shock-sensitive social protection that can complement humanitarian assistance in responding to the increasing extreme weather events and seasonal food scarcity of the next decades. Furthermore, social protection programmes and their scale-up options need to make their design adequately nutrition-sensitive. These actions are indeed urgent and necessary to break the cycle of hunger and poverty that the country is stuck in, thus being able to embark on a sustainable development path that ensures the human capital of the current and the next generation is not physically and cognitively impaired, because of unaddressed widespread malnutrition.

Finally, while the thesis contributes to the shock-responsive social protection and nutrition-sensitive literature, by making an overview of a representative case study, from which similar contexts can draw lessons from, the paper calls for several areas that need further research to focus on. Despite the increased use of social protection programmes for responding to shocks in the past decade, these have not been always successfully delivered (Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler, 2019; Varghese Boban et al., 2021), calling for evaluating both their successes and their failures to understand what should be improved for the next trials. Some crucial areas of SRSP and NS that require further research are financing mechanisms, targeting and MIS, integration and alignment along the humanitarian-development nexus and timing. Meticulous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the Government of Malawi response to Cyclone Freddy, including collection and recording of quantitative data to allow carrying out quantitative research can be highly beneficial to the development of future research.

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