

Project sites

Malawi agriculture is largely based on smallholder systems, which cultivate close to 80% of the land, generate about 75% of Malawi's agricultural output and provide for 85% of the labor force. However, more than 2/3rd of the smallholdings cultivate less than one hectare of land, and with limited investment of inputs. As a result of lack of access to credit, poor soils, and poor access to markets, yields per hectare lower than expected, while post-harvest losses are estimated to be around 40% of production. Livestock ownership is very low by regional standards. Performance of the livestock sector is affected by low productivity of the cropping sector. Access to financial services is severely restricted. Poor rural people are unable to diversify their agriculture-based income and therefore remain underemployed for most part of the year. It is a challenge to provide food security even at household level. Per capita meat consumption and animal protein intake are lowest in the region, contributing to poor nutrition among children.

Under such conditions intensification, diversification and market integration strategies are required to develop pathways out of poverty. Market integration is paramount to make farming economically more attractive, to stimulate investments in inputs and to retain rural youth through increased economic opportunities. To make this transformation, an effective and sustainable strong private sector involvement is crucial.

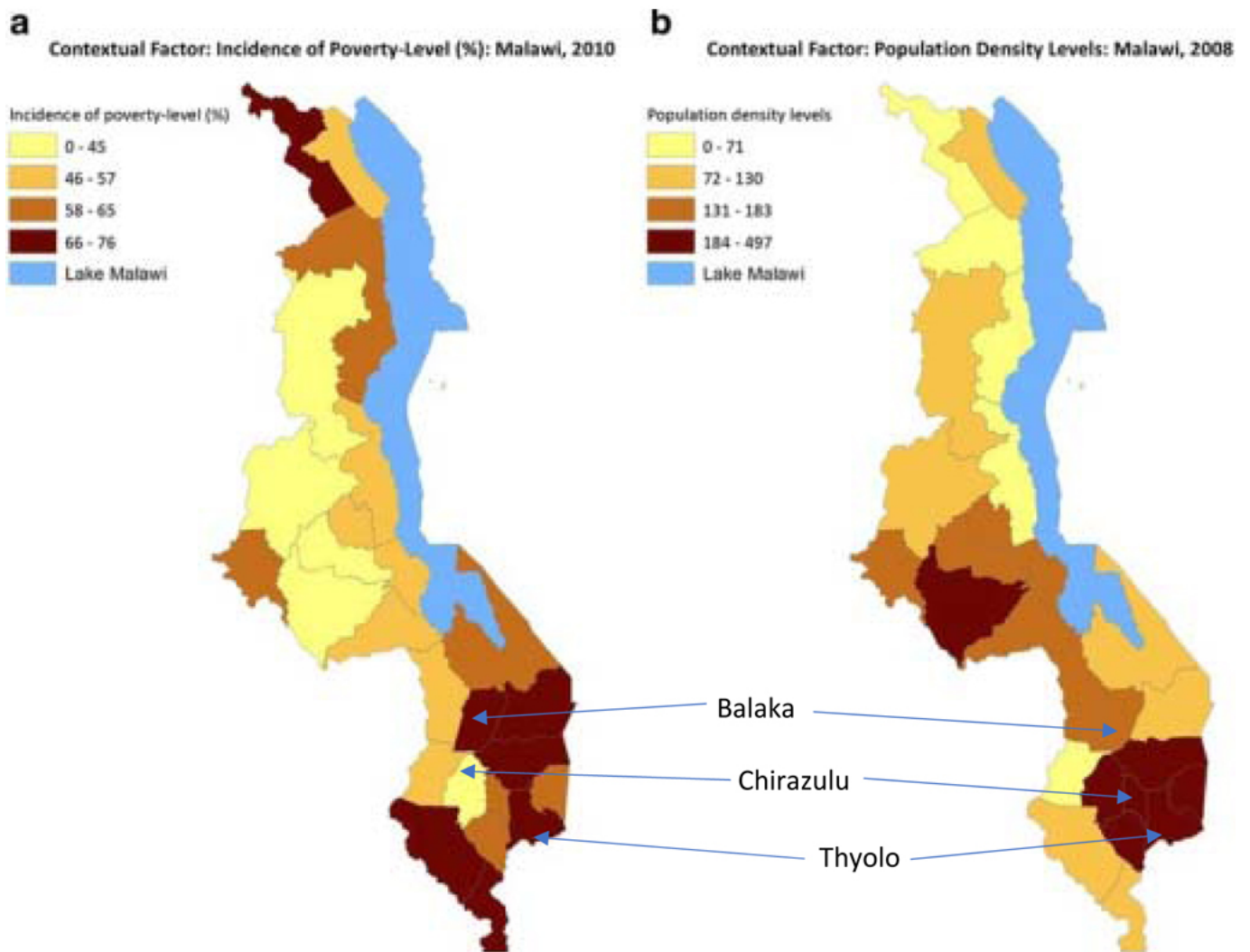
Poverty levels and human population densities are highest in Southern Malawi, creating challenges as well as opportunities for the project to make a change in people's lives. The project districts reflect the heterogeneity of farming systems in Southern Malawi, and highlight the need for solutions that match the context.

Balaka is the driest district, with water and biomass constraints, and a lower human population density as compared to the other project districts, yet in-migration and risk of conflicts is a challenge. Food insecurity and poverty are highest. External interventions are fewer compared to those in other districts. Livestock is particularly important, with high goat populations. Profitability of livestock production is higher in Balaka as compared to the other districts. To sustain healthy and quality goats to markets, feed production will be critical. Goat market development will be critical for more effective sales.

Chiradzulu district is nearest to Blantyre city, has moderate agro-ecological potential, a high human population density and high rate of interventions. Access to off-farm income is slightly better due to closeness to Blantyre. Infrastructure is, however, relatively poor. There is large-scale deforestation and degradation. Farming systems are diversified. Feed constraints are serious. Farmers already practice stall feeding. Developing fodder markets is an opportunity for those without livestock.

Thyolo district has the highest agro-ecological potential, cooler climate, more rain, favoring higher crop yields and irrigation. It has the largest

coverage of estates, for tea, macadamia nuts and poultry. Human population density is the highest, resulting in smallest land and herd sizes per household. The rate of external interventions is very high. This site has high potential for integration and intensification of crops and livestock.



Poverty levels (a) and human population densities (b) in Malawi, and project districts.

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