

# Analysis of Child-sensitive Social Protection in Malawi

## Final Report

*This report was commissioned by Save the Children Malawi. It aims to analyse the child-sensitivity of the social protection system in Malawi and provide recommendations to improve outcomes for children. The intended audience for the report includes central and line ministries of the Government of Malawi, bilateral and multilateral development partners, international NGOs, civil society organisations and independent agencies, among others.*

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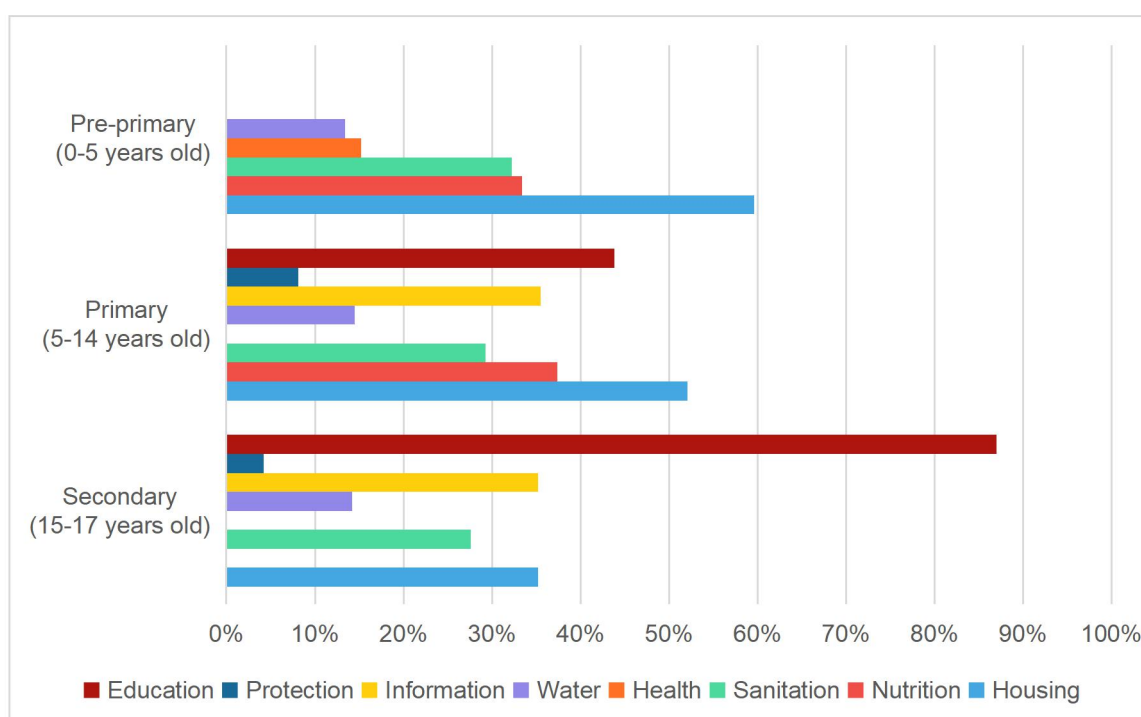
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# 1 Introduction

**Millions of children in Malawi are highly vulnerable and deprived.** About 60 percent of the country’s children are multi-dimensionally poor. Rates of children who are multi-dimensionally poor are higher in rural areas (70 percent) than in urban areas (25 percent). The high levels of deprivation span issues such as education, nutrition, housing, health, water, information, protection sanitation and hygiene. These are outlined further in Chart 1, below.<sup>1</sup>

**Despite declining fertility rates, Malawi is experiencing a demographic boom which will continue to place significant pressure on social service delivery for children in the years ahead.** Malawi’s population growth rate (2.9 percent) ranks among the 40 highest in the world. The population is projected to reach 30 million by 2030, with the number of children almost doubling from current levels to over 16 million (UNICEF 2018).

**Chart 1: Deprivations facing children in Malawi, according to life-cycle stage (proportion of children deprived in each category)**



Source: Malawi Child Poverty Report, 2018.

**Child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) can help to tackle, at scale, a wide range of childhood deprivations among the most deprived and marginalised<sup>2</sup>.** Moreover, an effective social protection system is essential to the realisation of child rights, and an extensive body of positive evidence on the impacts of social protection on children is one of the reasons why governments and donors, including those in Malawi, have supported its expansion in recent decades.

<sup>1</sup> Not all deprivations are measured for each life cycle stage. Only those deprivations shown in the Chart are measured for the respective life cycle stage.

<sup>2</sup> Marginalised children refers to those who face barriers to participation and development that are not purely economic, but also political, social and cultural.

**Malawi's social protection system is growing in scale and scope, but it has never been analysed from the perspective of children.** The 2016 review of the first Malawi National Social Support Programme (MNSSP I) identified an array of shortcomings; measures to address many of these gaps are incorporated in the successor programme, MNSSP II (2018-2023). While there is policy support for a large number of reform priorities, neither the 2016 review nor the MNSSP II incorporated a child lens. The present analysis in this report seeks to address this gap by analysing the social protection sector from the perspective of child sensitivity.

**The report develops and applies a child-sensitive methodology to help identify opportunities and challenges.** The analysis shines a light on the implications of the social protection system for children and provides recommendations to make the sector more child-sensitive. It is deliberately concise and does not include contextual information; that knowledge is assumed by the reader. Section 2 outlines the methodology for the analysis, which is applied in Section 3 to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the social protection sector with regard to child sensitivity, including recommendations. Section 4 provides brief concluding remarks.

## 2 Methodology and approach

**‘Child-sensitive social protection’ refers to the policies, programmes and systems that address the specific patterns of children’s poverty and vulnerability, are rights-based in approach, and recognise the long-term developmental benefits of investing in children.** This analysis of the child sensitivity of social protection in Malawi draws on a number of sources for its methodology. The foundation for the analysis is the Inter Agency Social Protection Assessments (ISPA) Core Diagnostic Instrument (CODI) which was developed with the support of international agencies including the World Bank, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the European Union (EU), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and Save the Children.

**The CODI provides a useful foundation for a child sensitive analysis of social protection.** CODI was developed as a standardised approach to the assessment of key elements of a social protection system in a given country, including objectives, strategies and programmes. It is increasingly being used by governments and stakeholders to identify ways to improve the performance of social protection systems. CODI uses eight performance criteria: inclusiveness, adequacy, appropriateness, rights and dignity, governance and institutional capacity, financial and fiscal sustainability, coherence and integration, and responsiveness.<sup>3</sup> The CODI approach is relatively broad-based, however, and does not apply a child lens.

**Two other main sources have been drawn on to develop a methodology for analysing the child-sensitivity of social protection in Malawi.** First, the methodology incorporates the perspective of Save the Children’s global position paper on CSSP, which considers the extent to which: (i) voices and views of children and their caregivers are taken into account; (ii) adverse impacts on children are minimised or avoided; and (iii) there are positive impacts on children (by age, gender and different forms of vulnerability) (Save the Children 2015). Second, reference has also been made to the framework developed by UNICEF’s Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) in 2014 to assess the child-sensitivity of social protection systems.<sup>4</sup> The eleven criteria in that framework address similar issues to the eight elements of the CODI approach, but give special emphasis to children.

**Drawing these sources together, the methodology for this CSSP analysis is based on the following eight criteria:**

1. **Inclusiveness:** using a life cycle approach to analyse the coverage of children that benefit from social protection and those that are excluded.
2. **Impact and adequacy:** the value and sufficiency of benefit levels, and the impacts of social protection schemes on child well-being by age, gender and different forms of vulnerability.
3. **Appropriateness:** the system’s overall arrangements to respond to national context, needs and norms, with a focus on the situation of children.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, there are two optional CODI performance criteria: cost-effectiveness (both for those financing and for those benefiting from a programme) and incentive compatibility (whether the system’s programmes generate distortionary effects). The official ISPA documentation states that these criteria are optional and are dependent on available evidence. Given the lack of evidence against these criteria in the case of Malawi, they have been excluded from this assessment.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF. 2014. *Assessing child-sensitivity in social protection*. UNICEF Regional Office of South Asia. Kathmandu, Nepal.

4. **Respect for rights and dignity:** transparency and accountability, the effectiveness of grievance and complaints mechanisms, child participation, and whether the system may be causing harm to children.
5. **Governance and institutional capacity:** the system’s rules, regulations, roles, responsibilities, and related implementation capacities.
6. **Financial and fiscal sustainability:** the level and quality of government spending on social protection, including direct and indirect expenditure on children.
7. **Coherence and integration:** the alignment and coherence of the system as it relates to children across its policies, programs, and administrative structures, as well as coherence with related policy areas.
8. **Responsiveness:** the system’s M&E framework and flexibility to adjust / adapt in response to the changing needs of children and socio-economic crises, including humanitarian crises.

**The social protection sector in Malawi is defined for the purposes of this analysis as including the following:**

- a) the three major programmes within the MNSSP II: the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP), public works (including programmes funded by the World Bank and WFP), and the School Meals Programme;
- b) the systems underpinning these programmes, such as various Management Information Systems (MIS) and the Unified Beneficiary Registry (UBR);
- c) the use of the social protection system to respond to shocks;
- d) ‘Cash Plus’ activities for SCTP and public works beneficiaries, including economic inclusion, graduation approaches, nutrition and financial inclusion.

**The three main programmes (SCTP, public works, school meals) are classified in Table 1 below by reference to life cycle stage and how each relates to children.** Each scheme is differentiated by reference to: benefits provided *directly* for children; benefits provided to *families or households* in which children live, but are not intended only for children; and benefits (such as an old age pension) provided to individual adults but which nevertheless may benefit children indirectly.

**Table 1: Classification of major social protection programmes in Malawi by reference to life cycle stage and relationship to children**

	Pre-primary	Primary	Secondary
Direct	Pilot nutrition top up for SCTP mothers	School bonus in SCTP School Meals Program	School bonus in SCTP
Family / Household	SCTP Public works	SCTP Public works	SCTP Public works
Indirect	-	-	-

**The approach taken to the analysis was as follows:** a desk review of literature on social protection in Malawi, followed by a mission to Lilongwe in early February 2020. The literature used for the desk review is included in the Bibliography. Key informant interviews were held in Malawi with government officials (central and line ministries), UN agencies, the World Bank, donors and international NGOs. Agencies were identified for key informant interviews based on substantive engagement in social protection in Malawi in policy, implementation or funding. The list of stakeholders consulted is at Annex A.

**There are some limitations to the analysis.** For instance, the study has focused only on the main social protection programmes that provide the large bulk of support. While this nevertheless reflects the overwhelming majority of support available in terms of coverage and transfers, it means the analysis is not comprehensive. An additional limitation is that there has not been scope to validate the content of the material with stakeholders in Malawi (outside of Save the Children) and correct any factual errors.

## 3 Analysis

This section addresses each of the eight criteria in turn, with analysis and recommendations against each.

### 3.1 Inclusiveness

*The social protection system should guarantee that children are protected at different stages of their life cycle. The goal is to eliminate coverage gaps and secure the inclusion of the poorest and most vulnerable. This entails ensuring non-discrimination, gender equality, and responding to the special needs of children with different characteristics, circumstances, and vulnerabilities.*

#### Analysis

**On the surface, aggregate coverage levels for social protection as of 2018 appear to be somewhat positive.** For the population as a whole, the coverage of social protection in Malawi is relatively favourable in comparison to the region. Despite lower spending vis-à-vis regional comparators, social protection programmes in Malawi have been estimated to cover 25 percent of the population, compared to an average of 10 percent across the Africa region (World Bank 2018). Malawi is also among the countries with the highest coverage of social protection in the region for its poverty level. (The *adequacy* of social protection is a separate consideration which is addressed below under 3.2.)

**However, the scaling down of public works activities funded by the World Bank will substantially reduce the coverage of poor households and therefore of children.** Between 2014 and 2019, the World Bank funded Malawi Social Action Fund IV (MASAF IV) provided cash transfers to approximately 450,000 poor households for participating in public works. Assuming an average of 2.6 children per household<sup>5</sup>, this implies that approximately 1,170,000 children were in households benefiting from cash transfers for public works. However, under the new World Bank funded programme Social Support for Resilient Livelihoods (commencing late 2020), the number of public works beneficiaries is being scaled down dramatically to a maximum of 35,000 households. This equates to just 91,000 children, meaning the number of children benefiting from public works will likely plummet by over one million by late 2020. As of 2019, a total of 154,560 households were participating in the WFP-implemented Food for Assets programme.<sup>6</sup> This implies approximately 401,856 children are in FFA beneficiary households, although numbers are not recorded by WFP.

**Just one in five of all poor children in Malawi are benefiting from cash or in-kind transfer programs.** Although coverage of the SCTP has quadrupled since 2011 and is now operational in every district, the programme only covers the poorest 10 percent of the population who are also labour constrained. Partly due to the nature of the targeting criteria for the SCTP and public works programmes, just 12 percent of the total number of children living in multidimensional poverty in Malawi are found in SCTP beneficiary households, and a further 9

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2017. Household Size and Composition Around the World 2017 – Data Booklet (ST/ESA/SER.A/405). Page 12. Available at [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/household\\_size\\_and\\_composition\\_around\\_the\\_world\\_2017\\_data\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/household_size_and_composition_around_the_world_2017_data_booklet.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Personal correspondence with WFP Malawi.

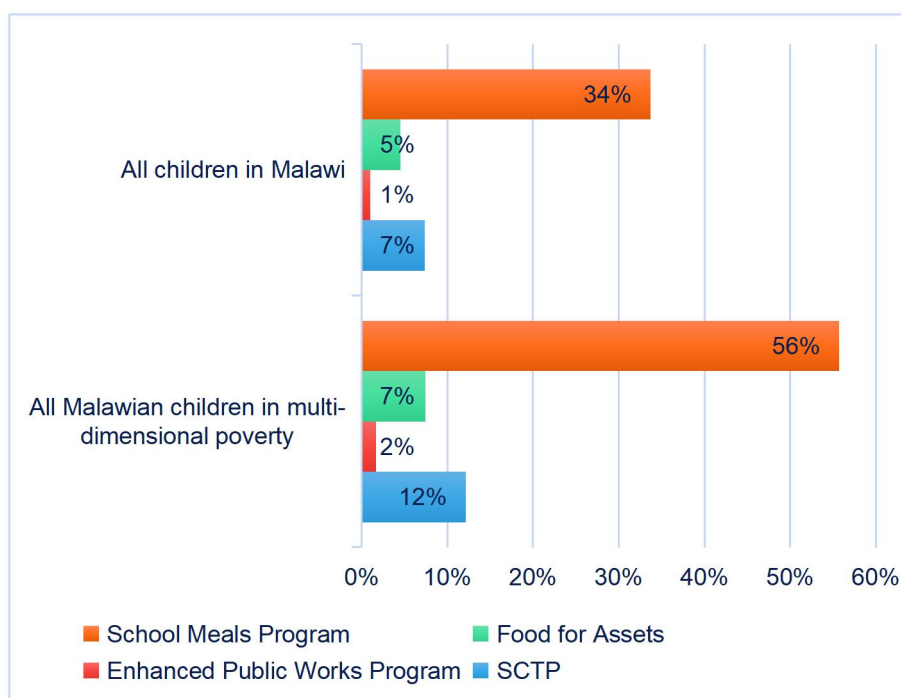
percent are in public works beneficiary households.<sup>7</sup> Putting aside the provision of school meals, the implication of this is obvious but is worth stating explicitly: *the overwhelming majority (79 percent) of poor children living in one of the poorest countries in the world are not in a household that benefits directly from cash or in-kind transfers.* These statistics are illustrated further in Table 2 and Chart 2 below.

**Table 2: Number of children in households benefiting from social protection programmes**

Life cycle stage	SCTP	Enhanced Public Works Program	Food for Assets	School Meals Program
Pre-primary (age 0-5)	93,385	Not available	Not available	0
Primary (age 6-11)	416,809	Not available	Not available	2,996,902
Secondary (age 12-17)	143,337	Not available	Not available	0
<b>Total</b>	653,531	91,000*	401,856**	2,996,902

**Sources:** SCTP MIS, Administrative data, Census data, Malawi Child Poverty Report 2018. \*Estimated figures for Enhanced Public Works Program assuming it proceeds in 2020-21 with a maximum of 35,000 households. \*\*Estimated figures based on 154,560 households and national average of 2.6 children.

**Chart 2: Proportion of children in households benefiting from social protection programmes**



<sup>7</sup> Author's calculations based on 442,000 children in FFA households and assuming Enhanced Public Works Program proceeds in 2020-21 with a maximum of 35,000 households. Calculations also assume that all children in beneficiary households are living in multidimensional poverty.



**Source:** SCTP MIS, Administrative data, Census data, Malawi Child Poverty Report 2018. Based on child population of 8.9 million in 2018 census, and multidimensional poverty of 60 percent. Estimated figures for Enhanced Public Works Program assuming it proceeds in 2020-21 with a maximum of 35,000 households.

**In contrast to a growing trend in the region, there are no cash transfer programs in Malawi which specifically target children -- either by age, gender, poverty, vulnerability or other factor.** A number of countries in the region recognise the special vulnerability of children and therefore place a particular emphasis on reaching them with social protection programs. Examples of social assistance programs which directly target households with children include Kenya's Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, Lesotho's Child Grant Program (for children under five) and Mozambique's Subsidio para Crianças (for children under two). One minor exception in Malawi is the provision by the SCTP of a modest 'bonus' payment for children in beneficiary households who enroll in school. (However, as is outlined in section 3.2, the level of these bonuses suggest they are inadequate to achieve meaningful impact on education outcomes. And, as already mentioned, the number of children covered as a share of those in multi-dimensional poverty is also very low.)

**A particularly critical gap in social protection coverage exists for children under five years of age in Malawi.** Just 2.1 percent of all children under five in country are in households covered by the SCTP. The early years of life are a critically important period for physical and cognitive growth and one characterized by dependence on others. Malawi suffers from high rates of malnutrition, and just 1.9 percent of SCTP beneficiaries are aged under two. The first 1,000 days of life (from conception to a child's second birthday) comprise the most crucial window as this is the period during which most physical growth, brain and psychosocial development occurs (World Bank, 2019b). It is also when around 70 percent of stunting occurs: when children grow up too short for their age due to chronic malnutrition. Thirty seven percent of Malawian children are affected by stunting, making them more likely to drop out of school and repeatedly experience lower productivity and earnings later in life. Importantly, although stunting rates are higher in poorer households, it remains highly prevalent in children across the income spectrum. Twenty-four percent of children in the highest wealth quintile are stunted (the rate for the lowest wealth quintile is 46 percent). The clear implication is that targeting by poverty alone will reach some, but not all children affected by malnutrition.

## Recommendations

- **The low coverage of poor and vulnerable children by social protection measures needs to be addressed over the medium term, led by government.** The primary reason for the low coverage of the SCTP is the availability of government financing. The government of Malawi has committed to donors that it will fund 10 percent of the costs of the SCTP. At present, it funds transfers in just one of the 28 districts. However, recognising that sustainability and ownership is fundamentally important, the government should take urgent steps to commit an increasing proportion of funding to the SCTP with a view to scaling it up beyond the current levels.
- **Alternative targeting methodologies, in particular categorical approaches, should be explored and potentially piloted.** Poverty in Malawi is deep and fluid. This means poverty reduction may not be the ideal lens for a social protection system which has limited funds, particularly as Proxy Means Tests are not well-suited to contexts with very high levels of poverty such. Alternative targeting methodologies such as categorical approaches (eg. children under five, elderly, disabled) may be more effective at covering the most

marginalized and deprived, be more administratively straightforward, and more acceptable to communities.

- **Nutrition-sensitive social protection initiatives should be introduced with a focus on children in their first 1,000 days.**<sup>8</sup> This should not be limited to children in SCTP households, and the UBR can perhaps be leveraged to inform and identify potential beneficiaries. It could include a maternal and child health grant focused on the first 1,000 days, complemented with additional interventions. International evidence points to a combination of regular cash transfers (either conditional or unconditional), social and behavioural change communication, and linkages to services such as care groups. It is promising that an initiative is under way, implemented by UNICEF with funding from DFID, but there are several variations which could be implemented to help build a more robust evidence base. The government is also developing guidance on nutrition-sensitivity, as detailed in 3.2.

## 3.2 Impact and adequacy

*Social protection programmes provide regular and predictable benefits and quality services that are adequate and sufficient to meet the needs of children. Social protection schemes have positive impacts on child well-being as measured by age, gender and different forms of vulnerability.*

### Analysis

**There have been detailed and robust evaluations of the SCTP, but no analysis of the impact of Malawian public works programmes on children.** The SCTP has been found to have strong impacts on consumption, livelihood, earnings, and also increased school enrolment and regular participation (Abdoulayi et al. 2016). It is concerning, however, that there has been no analysis with regard to the impact of public works on children. Indeed, the only independent impact evaluation of public works in Malawi found no evidence of improved food security and some negative spillovers to untreated households (Beegle et al, 2015). While public works wages are expected to have positive impact on young children whose caregivers are beneficiaries, the work requirements to receive the transfers are typically physically demanding, intensive and often carried out some distance from home. Recent research in the region shows the negative impacts on children in households participating in public works, including: harmful effects on young child nutrition; inadequate care and stimulation of young children who are taken to the worksite; reduced time of public works participants for caring and other domestic responsibilities; inadequate arrangements for care of children left at home; and increased child labour and reduced school attendance of older children who care for them (Ayliffe 2015).

**Important gaps remain in terms of the impact of social protection on nutrition, including during the critical first 1000 day window of opportunity, indicating unmet needs.** For example, a high proportion of the SCTP is spent on consumption, yet while food security of beneficiaries increases as a result, there are no positive impacts of the SCTP in reducing the levels of chronic malnutrition among young children. The SCTP is not targeted to prevent chronic malnutrition, however. Indeed, less than two percent of all individuals in households covered by the SCTP are aged under two<sup>9</sup>, plus it does not provide the necessary

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<sup>8</sup> A similar recommendation is made within the context of section 3.7.

<sup>9</sup> Source: SCTP MIS as at February 2020.

complementary activities that would be required (e.g. social behavior change communication), and transfer values are likely too low. It is therefore not surprising that there has been no impact on child growth outcomes. Government and development partners are now seeking to strengthen the nutrition sensitivity of social protection in Malawi, including through preparation of guidance for specific programmes. This is an encouraging and important development.

**While the SCTP has improved some education indicators, many bottlenecks remain to substantial impacts on school enrolment and retention.** The SCTP provides bonuses for children enrolling in primary school (800 MWK/month, about US\$1) and secondary school (1500 MWK/month, about US\$2). The additional funds are intended to help offset the costs of education. However, as noted in draft findings of a recent analysis commissioned by UNICEF, the school bonus represents just 9 and 12 percent of the total value of school-related out-of-pocket costs (including uniforms, school supplies, exam fees and so on) of primary and secondary education respectively. The SCTP impact evaluation found increased school attendance for SCTP children already enrolled in school, but no strong effect on new enrolment or grade progression. However, no effect on grade progression was reported and school drop-out rates began to increase steadily after age 12. A recent analysis by the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) reported even lower overall rates of school enrolment by children in SCTP households. While it is critical to recognise that social protection programs alone cannot address the constraints facing the education system in Malawi, it is nonetheless clear that the SCTP as currently designed is inadequate to make a significant difference to enrolment and retention. Many other poverty targeted social cash transfers have nevertheless been able to increase enrolment, with over 30 studies showing clear and consistent evidence of positive impacts on enrolment (Bastagli et al, 2016).

**The impact of the SCTP is diluted because the real value of the transfer declines over time relative to increasing prices, due to lack of indexation.** There is no specific or agreed schedule for updating the transfer levels of the SCTP, nor any apparent reason why this has not been agreed and instituted. The last update of the SCTP transfer level was in 2016. Prices continue to increase year on year, with food inflation currently at 14.2 percent. The recent decision to update the SCTP transfer levels (in July 2020) to an average of 9900 MWK per month is welcomed. However, it should not be overlooked that transfers were not updated in 2017, 2018 or 2019, meaning that SCTP beneficiaries, including children, are still worse off in real terms due to annual price inflation.

**The School Meals Program (SMP) should not be viewed as a substitute for comprehensive social protection or the sole vehicle to achieve improved child outcomes in nutrition and education.** By itself, the SMP is not a sufficiently powerful social protection instrument to address the nutrition or education needs facing children. Clearly, the SMP is not a substitute for income based support during the first 1000 days. Moreover, the evidence base for the SMP (in Malawi and elsewhere) is patchy and limited. The lack of rigorous evidence on the SMP's outcomes is particularly perplexing given it is the largest social safety net intervention in Malawi in terms of budget and coverage.

## Recommendations

- **The dearth of information regarding the impact of public works and school feeding programs in Malawi on children should be addressed.** There have been no independent and robust evaluations of public works in Malawi with regard to children nor of school feeding programs. There may be opportunities to improve the child-sensitivity of public

works and mitigate any negative impacts, and establishing an evidence base would be a valuable first step.

- **Nutrition-sensitive social protection initiatives should be introduced with a focus on children in their first 1,000 days** (as recommended under 3.1).
- **A road map is urgently needed to improve education outcomes for social protection beneficiaries.** A range of international evidence is available to inform an appropriate response by government and stakeholders to the findings that the SCTP is not having the desired impact on school enrolment and retention. The school bonus may provide a useful entry point, but a nuanced response is critical to help address the many constraints to school enrolment and retention.<sup>10</sup>
- **Transfer levels for social protection programs should be indexed to inflation and updated every year.** Notwithstanding the upcoming adjustment (effective July 2020), the real value of SCTP transfers will decrease significantly if they are not regularly adjusted in line with inflation. The only obstacle noted by stakeholders in Malawi was that one donor did not factor in any indexation for the duration of their SCTP funding agreement. Clear leadership and a stated policy position by government that transfer levels will be updated on an annual basis according to rural inflation would allow donors and the government of Malawi to plan and budget accordingly.

### 3.3 Appropriateness

*The system's overall arrangements to respond to the needs, norms and context of children. At a policy level, it means the use of evidence and formulation of clear and realistic targets and timeframes to better address social protection needs of children over time, taking into account financing and institutional capacities.*

#### Analysis

**The design of MNSSP II addresses some of the shortcomings of MNSSP I, although there is much work to be done, and the focus on children remains somewhat muted.** The MNSSP I had numerous shortcomings with regard to its appropriateness (relevance) for children. It focused mainly on economic development aspects of social protection with limited recognition of the role that social protection could play in addressing Malawi's extremely poor human capital indicators, which are of critical importance to children and to the future economic prospects of Malawi more broadly. Malawi has a Human Capital Index of 0.41 (as of 2017), meaning a child born today in Malawi will only be 41 percent as productive compared to a situation where the child had complete education and full health. The MNSSP II has a prominent emphasis on social and human development, but it remains to be seen whether this can or will be implemented in practice. For instance, while there are clear opportunities to leverage social protection programmes to address challenges in areas such as early childhood development (ECD) and nutrition, there is currently limited progress in doing so. The World Bank's Investing in Early Years programme, which sought to link SCTP beneficiaries with ECD and nutrition services, has made little progress since its launch. The MNSSP II itself also lacks details on the situation of children, beyond brief references in the Introduction to the rate of multidimensional child poverty.

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<sup>10</sup> The program completion report of the DFID-funded Keeping Girls in School Programme (2012-2018) is informative. It is available at this link: [http://iati.dfid.gov.uk/iati\\_documents/44122320.odt](http://iati.dfid.gov.uk/iati_documents/44122320.odt)

**The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework for the MNSSP II is weak with regard to the level of information on children.** The framework tracks a handful of simple indicators such as the number of children benefiting from the SCTP, the number of SCTP child headed households, and the total number of boys and girls enrolled in schools that benefit from the school meals programme. This reveals a number of shortcomings. For instance, there is no information about the number of children benefiting (indirectly) from public works, even though more than [170,000] households participate in public works activities. This is because implementers of public works programs do not track the number of children in participating households, although there are opportunities to do so where program databases are interoperable with the UBR.<sup>11</sup> More substantively, beyond school enrolment, the M&E framework does not track information that might shed light on deprivations facing children and to what extent social protection is contributing to reduced deprivation.

**More broadly, the social protection system has been static in light of data and analysis on the needs of children, particularly those not benefiting from the SCTP.** There is extensive evidence about the extreme challenges and multiple deprivations facing children in Malawi. The *Child Poverty in Malawi* reports of 2015 and 2018 showed that multidimensional poverty afflicts about two-thirds of the child population. Yet the social protection system has not responded to these analyses, despite broad awareness among government and stakeholders. There is also a very prominent focus in Malawi on children in SCTP beneficiary households, despite these children representing just 12 percent of Malawian children living in multidimensional poverty. Given deep poverty and high levels of child deprivation, and recognising the importance of social cohesion, there is a need to ensure a balanced focus based on overall need.

## Recommendations

- **Those aspects of the MNSSP II which are most critical to child well-being, such as nutrition and education, should be prioritised.** The MNSSP II includes a lengthy list of strategic actions across the five pillars. However, since the document was launched in mid 2018, progress has been slow. It is encouraging that government intends to spearhead a five-year strategy for the SCTP. This would involve a detailed articulation of *which* SCTP strategic actions in the MNSSP II will be prioritised and *how* they will be implemented. Those relating to children should be at the top of the list of priorities.
- **MNSSP II stakeholders require improved and more regular information on the types and causes of vulnerabilities and deprivations faced by children in Malawi.** In general, there is a need for improved monitoring of the impacts of social protection on children, disaggregated by sex and age, to identify positive impacts and negative unintended impacts.
- **In particular, accurate and accessible data is needed regarding children in households participating in public works programs.** In addition to the need for evidence on the impact of public works on children (see 3.2), the poor level of information regarding households in public works programs is not conducive to evidence-based decision making. UBR officials indicated that this information could be generated through cross-referencing information held in the MIS for the World Bank funded public works programme and the UBR. Such information should be generated and reported on a regular basis and should have been included in the overarching M&E Framework.

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<sup>11</sup> The MIS for the World Bank funded public works program is interoperable with the UBR, meaning that it would be possible to identify public works households in the UBR and the number of children recorded in each household. The database used by WFP for its programming, SCOPE, is not currently interoperable with the UBR.

- **That said, government should nonetheless make use of evidence which already exists on the needs of children, including deprived children not benefiting from social protection programs.** Investments in surveys have yielded a range of valuable data which can be drawn on by government and development partners. The *Child Poverty in Malawi* report provides invaluable information about child deprivation, disaggregated by district level. Such information should be brought to the attention of social protection decision makers through various mechanisms to assist in the use of evidence to better address the social protection needs of deprived children.
- **Improve the child-sensitivity of existing and future programmes.** This requires maximizing benefits for children in recipient households, or, at a minimum, minimizing unintended risks and harms to child well being. This is best done in the design stage and by integrating child focused indicators in monitoring frameworks.

### 3.4 Respect for rights and dignity

*The system is transparent and accountable, for instance through effective and efficient grievance and complaints mechanisms procedures which are accessible to children. Social protection programmes and benefits are in line with human rights standards and principles, including participation by children in design and delivery, and ensuring the system does not cause harm to children.*

#### Analysis

**A harmonised approach to complaints is being developed, but gaps remain with regard to child participation and social accountability more broadly.** Efforts are currently under way to harmonise grievance redress mechanisms for the SCTP and public works programs. This would allow beneficiaries of these programs to use a common channel for complaints and feedback and is expected to enhance the range of options available to register grievances. However, it is not yet clear whether the mechanism will be accessible to children, which mirrors the fact that children have not participated in the design, implementation or review of Malawi's social protection initiatives. This is despite the reality that they represent the majority of SCTP beneficiaries overall (albeit still a very small proportion of the child population of Malawi). More broadly, there is a lack of social accountability in relation to social protection in Malawi, affecting both children and adults. Communication by the Malawian government to citizens, beneficiaries and children about the social protection programmes it oversees and implements has also been limited. Targeting criteria, for instance, are not uniformly well understood by communities (Ansell et al, 2019).

**There is increasing analysis on the links between child labour and social protection programmes.** This has included distinguishing between involvement in household level activities and the worst forms of child labour. For instance, recent research examined whether SCTP households rely on children to expand their agricultural businesses. The SCTP was found to increase overall child engagement in economic activities, although children were supportive of an expansion of household agricultural activities (UNICEF Office of Research -- Innocenti, 2018). Furthermore, working hours were generally moderate and other child wellbeing indicators such as school participation and physical health were found to improve.



## Recommendations

- **Opportunities should be identified for children to participate in the design, implementation and/or monitoring of social protection, including through social accountability mechanisms.** There is a broader need to establish and strengthen social accountability mechanisms in Malawi, and the engagement of children with regard to social protection would provide an ideal opportunity to pursue this agenda. Potential options include the harmonised grievance redress mechanism and other tools such as social audits, community score cards and Child Parliaments at district level. Social protection accountability mechanisms will also have broader benefits and help address child protection issues. An increase in the number and range of communications channels available to children can assist in tackling the widespread abuses that continue to occur on a daily basis.
- **Careful analysis of child labour dynamics should be integrated into all social protection initiatives.** This is particularly the case where social protection programmes (including economic inclusion activities) promote business activities that can be carried out by children or focus on labour-constrained households that may rely on children for income generation.

## 3.5 Governance and institutional capacity

*Sufficient institutional capacity, and clear internal rules, regulations, reporting mechanisms, and operating procedures.*

### Analysis

**Malawi's social protection institutional structures are of mixed effectiveness, and there is no clear alignment or coordination between stakeholders with a special interest in children.** The social protection infrastructure is well understood at the central level, although effective coordination remains a challenge. While the national level structure offers the opportunity for relevant line ministries and development partners to communicate and share information, in practice this is modest. There is limited capacity within the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development (MoFEP&D) to ensure all stakeholders are held accountable or to enforce cross-ministerial coordination (World Bank, 2018). The proliferation of donors contributes to fragmentation with different financing structures and implementation modalities. There is no dedicated strategic alignment nor active coordination among social protection actors with a particular interest in the well-being of children, such as the MGCSW, Save the Children or UNICEF — a concerning situation which represents a major missed opportunity to advance child rights. Malawi's recently established National Children's Commission, which is intended to have responsibility for policy guidance to Government and multi-sectoral coordination with key ministries and stakeholders, has not yet become involved in social protection. There are, however, some good examples of coordination in practice, including the regular and relatively well-functioning coordination meetings for the SCTP, and the experience of the UBR as a shared administrative tool.

**Institutional capacity at the sub-national level is patchy, which inevitably has implications for children in beneficiary households.** Many district officials must contend with inadequate resourcing, infrastructure, and staffing, which limit their ability to operate effectively (World Bank, 2018). In addition, most social protection programs have independent implementing structures often involving the same stakeholders, which can unduly overstretch district coordination capacities. One of the bottlenecks that has become clear in recent years is delayed updating of SCTP lists through case management processes. Potential scenarios

include eligible households remaining on the waiting list rather than being enrolled, or transfer levels not reflecting the appropriate level of school bonus. In combination with limited beneficiary understanding and poor social accountability mechanisms, the constraints to case management likely mean that vulnerable households and children are not being supported to the extent envisaged by the MNSSP II.

### Recommendations

- **It would be beneficial and feasible for actors with a particular interest in child sensitive social protection to collaborate more actively.** An alliance for children between UNICEF, Save the Children and the MGCSW could help strengthen the profile of children in the social protection sector. The National Children’s Commission could also play an important role in promoting this agenda. Potential avenues include: (i) expansion of nutrition sensitive social protection; (ii) improving the impact and coverage of existing schemes; (iii) understanding and putting measures in place to minimize unintended harms; and (iv) over the medium term, designing child-focused schemes.
- **The need to address sub-national capacity is long overdue, and substantial improvements in SCTP case management should be prioritised.** Problems with case management have been well known for several years, yet no action has been forthcoming to address the issues. There are many potential innovations, such as tablet computers for use at community level, that could be introduced or piloted to improve the quality and relevance of data in the SCTP.

## 3.6 Financial and fiscal sustainability

*The level and quality of government spending on social protection, including direct and indirect expenditure, is aligned with the needs of children.*

### Analysis

**Social protection expenditure in Malawi is overwhelmingly financed by donors, and the government’s allocation to the SCTP is insufficient to cover even one district.** Total expenditure on social protection in Malawi by government and development partners was equivalent to 0.6 percent of GDP between 2011 and 2016, a strikingly low amount compared to an average of 1.2 percent across the Africa region (World Bank, 2018). Compared to other countries in the region, Malawi implements a narrow range of social protection interventions that target the most vulnerable households. In other low-income African countries, the average is 18 programs (Beegle et al, 2018). Furthermore, an estimated 94 percent of all social protection expenditure in Malawi is financed by development partners. The government’s primary budgetary allocation for social protection is to the SCTP, yet even those funds are insufficient to cover its commitment to fund transfers in just one of the 28 districts, Thyolo. In FY2018/19, the Government’s contribution to social protection consisted of approximately US\$2.1 million (MWK 1.55 billion) for SCTP cash transfers in Thyolo plus US\$980,000 (MWK 731 million) for salaries and utilities (UNICEF Budget Brief, 2019). However, UNICEF estimated that a minimum of approximately US\$3.4 million (MWK 2.5 billion) was required solely for cash transfers, general coordination and monitoring in Thyolo alone.

**The level of government spending on social protection is clearly not aligned with the needs of poor and vulnerable children.** The main expenditure by government is to the SCTP households of Thyolo, comprising about 35,600 children, equating to 5.4 percent of all children in SCTP households nationally, and just 0.66 percent of all Malawian children living in



multidimensional poverty.<sup>12</sup> The government allocation is also insufficient for other core ongoing needs in social protection such as capacity building, knowledge management, monitoring and evaluation. Further detail on expenditure on social protection is in Table 3.

**Table 3: Expenditure for child-sensitive social protection**

	Total expenditure in 2018-19 (US\$)	Total expenditure by Government of Malawi (US\$)	Percentage of overall government expenditure (%)
<b>SCTP</b>	30.2m	3.06m	10.1
<b>Enhanced Public Works Program</b>	1.4m*	0	0
<b>Food for Assets</b>	TBC	0	0
<b>School Meals Program</b>	36.35m	0	0

**Source:** MoFEPD data; MGCSW data; UNICEF Budget Brief 2019; author's calculations; \*2019-20 figures representing EPWP pilot for 10,000 households.

**The amount of information and analysis in relation to child sensitive public financing is limited.** In recent years, UNICEF has analysed the national budget with regard to social sectors such as health, education, child protection and social welfare (i.e. social protection). This analysis focuses primarily on the quantity of expenditure for certain sectors, and is not disaggregated beyond what is available in the budget papers. A Social Protection Public Expenditure Review undertaken by the MoFEPD, the World Bank and UNICEF will shortly be published, although it does not have a child lens. To date, no analysis has yet been undertaken looking at the proportion or quality of social protection expenditure which indirectly or directly supports children. However, UNICEF and the ILO intend to carry out a public expenditure diagnostic of all social protection programs in Malawi, based on a life cycle approach.

**Social insurance is treated differently to other parts of the social protection sector in Malawi, despite have more than double the expenditure of all social safety net programs.** The two social insurance programs are the public sector Civil Service Pension Scheme (CSPS) and the private sector National Pension System. These programs cover less than five percent of people over the age of 65 in Malawi, and the vast majority of recipients are in the wealthiest 40 per cent of the population (MGCSW 2016). The CSPS alone absorbs 1.2 percent of GDP (World Bank 2019c), exactly double the average expenditure on social assistance between 2011 and 2016 (World Bank 2018).

## Recommendations

- **A government-led financing strategy for social protection is essential.** The proportion of expenditure by the Government of Malawi on social protection is extremely small relative

<sup>12</sup> The number of children in SCTP households in Thyolo is drawn from SCTP MIS as of February 2020. The estimated number of children living in multidimensional poverty is based on a rate of 60 percent out of the total number of children in Malawi as per the 2018 Census (8.9 million).

to overall funding for the sector. Development partner funding cannot continue indefinitely, and leadership is required by government to establish and articulate a strategy for a gradual increase in financing. The strategy should also incorporate a costing of potential or agreed reforms to social protection programmes envisaged in the MNSSP II, such as lifting or removing the 10 percent district level cap of the SCTP. A balanced and sequenced approach is needed which recognises the priority of bedding down the core elements of the programmes (such as cash transfers) with gradual incorporation of financial contributions to additional ‘cash plus’ components — which are explained further in 3.7.

- **There is an ongoing need for regular analysis on the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of social protection expenditure for children.** The annual Budget Briefs undertaken by UNICEF provide a valuable resource for government and social protection stakeholders. More detailed analysis, such as the life cycle analysis of expenditure on social protection to be undertaken by UNICEF and ILO, presents a valuable opportunity for insights and recommendations.

### 3.7 Coherence and Integration

*The set of existing programmes are internally coherent in that they complement each other with regard to addressing the gravest child deprivations..*

#### Analysis

**Creating linkages between programmes faces multiple challenges, in particular an adequate supply of services.** A common objective of social protection is to improve access to services for beneficiaries, but it is apparent that SCTP beneficiaries continue to face significant constraints in this regard. The pilot SCTP Linkage and Referral (L&R) system sought to assist SCTP beneficiaries to access existing social services and maximize the impact of the transfers they receive. However, a key constraint facing the pilot was an inadequate supply of services to which beneficiaries could be referred. Supply side constraints cover sectors including education (eg. support for school uniforms), agriculture and counselling for HIV. Other challenges include services that are too distant or expensive and services with closed lists of beneficiaries.

**Emerging efforts to improve outcomes for children through ‘cash plus’ are welcome, but supply side will need to be addressed to achieve desired results.** ‘Cash plus’ initiatives which link beneficiaries with complementary services can help to address the cost of accessing services. To date, there has been limited focus on improving outcomes for children in SCTP households, and no initiatives at all for children in public works households. A recent UNICEF-DFID initiative to improve nutrition outcomes for children in SCTP households is a welcome development. But cash plus initiatives will not necessarily achieve the desired results; the bottlenecks to addressing child deprivation will remain without an adequate supply of accessible and quality services.

**There is a danger for children and vulnerable groups if participation in “graduation” initiatives is linked to ineligibility for cash transfer programmes.** A number of graduation programmes have recently commenced with a focus on SCTP beneficiaries, including the large FARMSE programme financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Participation in such promotive programmes is typically for 18-24 months. However, beneficiaries who participate in a graduation programme are not automatically on a

sustainable pathway out of poverty. They may still require support from social protection, as the prospects of those living in poverty or close to the poverty line are often highly fluid. A single shock can have catastrophic implications. Furthermore, there is no coherence between social protection programs in Malawi: a household exiting the SCTP does not transition automatically into another form of social protection, such as public works.

## Recommendations

- **Opportunities exist to leverage the social protection system, particularly the SCTP, to help address child malnutrition.** Cash plus for nutrition initiatives in other contexts have had beneficial impacts on addressing malnutrition among children. For instance, Save the Children has pioneered an approach that combines regular cash transfers with nutrition-specific interventions during the critical first 1000 days of life. Known as the Resourcing Families for Better Nutrition (RF4BN) approach, it has had strong results in a range of countries through combining a regular cash transfer with social behavioural change communication (SBCC) and linking families to relevant health services. Such approaches could be introduced in Malawi and closely integrated with the social protection system; for instance through working with SCTP district level officials and systems (within existing capacity) and through national level knowledge sharing and advocacy.
- **Broader efforts are needed, including advocacy across government, to improve the supply of services for children.** While this obviously goes beyond the scope of the social protection system, this does not mean that social protection actors should remain silent or siloed. Government agencies such as MoFEPD and MGCSW should advocate internally in support of improved service delivery. Robust cross-sector conversations are required with line ministries that provide the services to (a) show the potential for SP to increase access to services and (b) work together to advocate for adequate funding to strengthen those services as part of a broader package of improving human capital development. The same is true of non-government agencies, particularly given that those such as UNICEF, the World Bank, German government and EU are also engaged in the education, health and nutrition in Malawi. That said, government efforts to improve the supply of services should not come at the cost of government commitment to funding core social protection programmes.
- **Graduation programs can be useful, but designers and implementers should ensure no adverse consequences for children.** The introduction of graduation initiatives for vulnerable households in Malawi underscores the importance of social protection throughout the life cycle. A catastrophic health event can plunge all but the wealthiest citizens into a poverty trap which they and their children may not be able to overcome. For children in beneficiary households, it is crucial that participation by beneficiaries in graduation initiatives is not linked to automatic ineligibility for long term social protection. Sensitisation of international best practices on child-sensitive graduation programs, and reference to Save the Children's guidance note on child-sensitive graduation programming<sup>13</sup>, are useful tools to raise awareness by stakeholders on the opportunities and challenges of economic inclusion initiatives. This includes designing a graduation programme by examining each key aspect and ensuring that components are (individually and collectively) designed in a way that it maximizes outcomes on children and minimizes any harm.

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<sup>13</sup> Save the Children. 2019. "Child Sensitive Graduation Programming Design." Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/child-sensitive-graduation-programming-design-guidance-brief-country-offices>

### 3.8 Responsiveness

*The system has the flexibility to adjust / adapt in response to the changing needs of children and socio-economic crises, including in humanitarian crises. Responsiveness requires regular monitoring and periodic evaluation of these developments as well as of the social protection programmes and schemes.*

#### Analysis

**The Malawian social protection system has becoming increasingly responsive to humanitarian crises, but a number of fundamental operational issues remain and the visibility of children is limited.** Significant progress has been made in the capacity of the system to respond to shocks, as evidenced by vertical expansion of the SCTP every year since 2017-18 and a range of other initiatives (Longhurst and Sabates-Wheeler, 2019). However, problems of fragmentation have become highly visible, including different timetables and reporting requirements for the humanitarian and social protection systems. Inclusive and effective coordination within government and with relevant stakeholders remains problematic, not least due to different approaches being taken depending on the actors and donors involved. The profile of children in shock responsive social protection is also minimal. A particular concern is that the dominant lens remains food insecurity, yet recent UNICEF analysis shows that children suffer temporary yet significant changes in non-food related deprivations during the lean season in Malawi. Analysis is proposed to assess whether delivery of cash through the social protection system may be effective in helping to address those deprivations.

#### Recommendations

- **Government and development partners must prioritise their efforts on the most critical operational issues facing shock responsive social protection.** These include enabling the SCTP MIS to cater for vertical and horizontal expansion; developing a harmonised grievance redress mechanism that can meet both social protection and humanitarian needs; and determining appropriate coordination structures at both national and district levels. While there are many possible technical variations or adjustments that could be introduced or piloted in Malawi, and many experiences and lessons can be drawn upon, including work underway by Save the Children in Ntcheu, with funding from Irish Aid. The most pressing need is for a cohesive focus by all stakeholders on identifying and addressing major operational bottlenecks.
- **Analysis on the impact of shocks on child deprivations should be incorporated into SRSP in due course.** The forthcoming findings from UNICEF will shed light on options to revise transfer levels or modalities, and can be addressed over the medium term.

## 4 Concluding remarks

**The future of Malawi is facing a critical juncture, and yet millions of vulnerable children are powerless.** Ahead lies a demographic boom, fuelled by high population growth. Around two in three children live in multidimensional poverty, and the number of children in Malawi will almost double by 2030. Social services are already overstretched beyond capacity. In primary schools there are over 75 children for every teacher and over 120 children in each classroom. Forty percent of Malawians aged under 5, more than a million children, are chronically malnourished.

**Failing to invest in these children now will perpetuate the intergenerational transmission of poverty in the future.** Child-sensitive social protection presents an opportunity to help break that vicious cycle. It can operate at scale to tackle a broad range of deprivations. Investing in the children of today is an investment in the future of the country, helping to avoid irreversible harms to Malawi's human capital development, and reaping the biggest returns from a growing number of assets.

**The social protection sector in Malawi has achieved a great deal over the past decade and there is much to be proud of.** Effective and successful programs such as the SCTP have been rolled out to national level, while weaker programs such as MASAF public works have been scaled down. There have been strong investments in systems which will drive improvements in efficiency and effectiveness, such as the expansion of the UBR and electronic payments. The capacity of the system to respond to shocks has also been strengthened.

**But business-as-usual social protection is woefully inadequate for the task at hand.** Overall coverage of children is abysmal, and there is an enormous deficiency of support for children under five and in particular the first 1000 days. The value of transfers has declined over time and additional cash bonuses have proven insufficient to improve education outcomes. The degree of national ownership is concerning with government expenditure on social assistance barely breaking the surface.

**Urgent action is required to invest in children and sow the seeds of a prosperous Malawi.** Existing and future programmes should maximize the benefits for children and minimize unintended risks and harms to child well being. All the recommendations in this report require action, although capacity constraints necessitate some sequencing. The priorities should include the following:

1. Address the **low coverage** of children in social protection, potentially through trialling **categorical** approaches to targeting.
2. Introduce **nutrition-sensitive** social protection initiatives with a focus on the first 1,000 days.
3. Develop a road map to **improve education outcomes** for social protection beneficiaries.
4. Establish a credible government-led **financing strategy** for social protection.
5. Strengthen **social accountability** mechanisms, including for children.

**This will require a team effort.** There are no short cuts, but working in partnership can often yield higher returns. Perhaps the time is ripe to establish a **Coalition for Child-sensitive Social Protection** to prosecute this agenda; an alliance for the future of Malawi.

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## Annex A Stakeholders consulted

Agency	Name
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