

## CASE STUDY

# Improving household food security and economic status of vulnerable households in Mangochi District

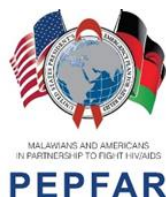
With support from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a multi-sectoral quality improvement (QI) team of extension workers and community members in Mangochi District, Malawi targeted a total of 587 vulnerable households to be linked to household economic strengthening activities. The QI team mobilized various stakeholders in Mpeya area to work together to reach vulnerable families in the catchment area with various services to improve their wellbeing. The CBO targeted 21 villages in four Group Village Heads in the district. In March 2014, Mpeya QI team conducted assessments on 25% of registered vulnerable children in selected communities. They identified food insecurity among vulnerable households as their priority problem. The QI team conducted root cause analyses on food insecurity among vulnerable households and discovered numerous root causes to the challenges. The QI team tested a number of possible solutions to improve household food security and diversity. Over the years, the QI team has recorded improvements in families being able to use modern methods of farming from 0% (April-June 2015) to 64% (July-September 2017). Similarly, vulnerable families involved in livestock production went from 13% (April-June 2015) to 64% (July-September 2017). The Mpeya team also recorded outstanding improvements (8% to 76%) in improving the number of vulnerable beneficiaries establishing kitchen gardens to help vulnerable beneficiaries diversify their diets.

## Background

In 2014, the USAID Applying Science to Strengthen and Improve Systems (ASSIST) project scaled up its quality improvement support to new communities in two districts of Balaka and Mangochi in Malawi. Learning from experiences from five existing communities, ASSIST added another five teams to improve access to social services using quality improvement (QI) methods. Mpeya Community Based Organisation (CBO) was one of the five new teams that was selected to be supported in the two districts. Mpeya CBO was established in 2005 and the CBO's catchment area targets a total of 21 villages in four Group Village Heads in Traditional Authority Chilipa. The CBO operates in Nikisi Village and is supporting a total of 1,843 OVC and 3,235 vulnerable beneficiaries in the area. To begin this work, the Ministry of Gender Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MOGCDSW) supported by ASSIST facilitated a three-day QI training for the new teams in Balaka District. A total of five representatives from Mpeya CBO were trained in QI on 3-6<sup>th</sup> March 2015. After the training, the Mpeya QI team met various stakeholders in the 21 surrounding villages and invited them to a meeting to agree to work together to improve lives of vulnerable families. The team invited government extension workers

### **Figure 1: Mpeya QI team composition**

1. CBO Director
2. Agriculture extension Officer
3. CBO Members-7
4. Health Surveillance Assistant
5. Child Protection Worker
6. HTC Counsellor
7. Village Headman
8. Area Development Committee representative
9. Village Development Committee representative
10. Volunteer mother mentor
11. Early Childhood Development Cluster mentor



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based in the communities such as the Agriculture Extension Worker, Health Surveillance Assistant, primary school headmasters, and HIV Testing Services Counsellors as well as other stakeholders supporting vulnerable children (i.e. mothers' group representatives, village heads, People Living with HIV [PLHIV] support group members, home based care volunteers, and Early Childhood Development caregivers). The CBO briefed the group on what they learned from the QI training sessions and the agreed next steps. After the meeting, a multi-sectoral QI team was selected and formed and they agreed to work together with Mpeya CBO to improve social services in the area on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015. The QI team was formed with 13 members. The team agreed to conduct random systematic assessments of registered vulnerable children in their targeted communities to identify priority issues among vulnerable families.

CHILD STATUS INDEX CSI SCORES			CHILD STATUS INDEX CSI SCORES (%)		
DOMAINS	SCORES		DOMAINS	SCORES	PERCENTAGE
1a Food Security	2	28.57%	1a Food Security	2+1	118.80%
1b Nutrition & Growth	35	48.18%	1b Care	2+1	100.68%
2a Share	14	39.66%	2a Education & Work	2+1	97.66%
2b Care	22	26.79%	2b Share	2+1	95.64%
3a Abuse & Exploitation	63	56.20%	3a Performance	2+1	88.59%
3b Legal Protection	66	47.26%	3b Nutrition & Growth	2+1	65.44%
4a Wellness	38	63.28%	4a Care (HEALTH)	2+1	50.34%
4b Health Care Services	58	40.35%	4b Wellness	2+1	47.32%
5a Emotional Health	49	59.31%	5a Emotional Health	2+1	40.27%
5b Social Behaviour	90	38.16%	5b Legal Protection	2+1	35.24%
6a Performance	23	37.37%	6a Abuse & Exploitation	2+1	29.20%
6b Education & Work	24	27.13%	6b Social Behaviour	2+1	20.14%

Mpeya Child status index summary tally sheet. Photo by Linley Hauya, ASSIST Malawi

### Identifying gaps in social services

Before implementing any activity to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable households, the QI team wanted to understand the root causes of the persistent food insecurity challenges among vulnerable households in the area. They conducted a problem analysis using a fishbone diagram as shown in Figure 1.

The team discovered that there were numerous underlying challenges that were resulting in food insecurity among vulnerable households such as the following:

- Limited agricultural farming inputs and materials that contribute to persistent annual food shortages
- Limited agriculture produce preservation knowledge among farmers which results in poor storage of harvested agricultural produce
- Attitudes of farmers towards agricultural production
- Non-adherence to best agricultural practices
- Limited agricultural extension services in the area
- Climate changes resulting in erratic rainfall patterns in the area
- Cultural practices in the community such as commemorating lives of those that died a few years ago, celebrating successful journeys for those about to embark on long journeys (migrating to South Africa), and cultural initiation ceremonies. In all these cultural activities, a lot of food is prepared and wasted in the communities. Some families also exchange a lot of food crops for plastic basins, pots, and clothing. These cultural practices have been observed to contribute towards food shortages because while a family may have harvested enough, due to these practices they have food shortages later in the year.

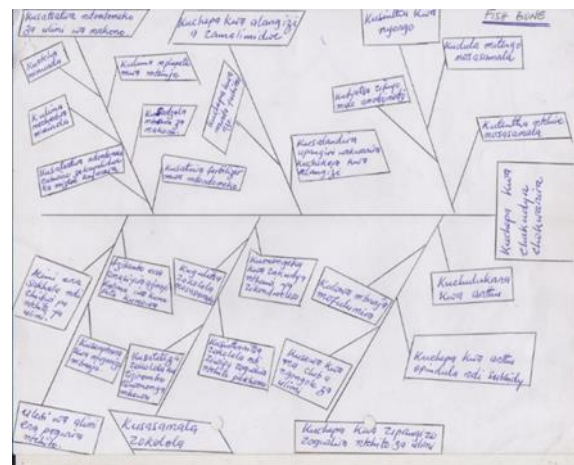


Figure 1: Mpeya fishbone diagram on food insecurity and economic wellbeing of vulnerable households. Photo by Linley Hauya, ASSIST Malawi

After the team had a thorough understanding of the extent of the food insecurity problems in their communities the team proposed to test some evidence-based changes to improve food security in the

vulnerable households. The Mpeya team first decided to target only a few vulnerable families with food security and economic strengthening interventions. The team targeted 119 vulnerable households in the catchment area.

The team developed a specific improvement aim which was 'to improve food security and economic wellbeing of vulnerable households registered in the program from 13% to 80% by intensifying community involvement in eight Village Agricultural Centres within 12 months.

Mpeya QI team outlined a number of possible changes to test to improve household food insecurity in the targeted 119 vulnerable households.

### **Changes tested**

The first activity which Mpeya QI team planned to do was to sensitize all vulnerable households in post-harvest handling since the time they started their improvement work was close to the harvesting season. They wanted all of the targeted vulnerable households to be aware of how to preserve their harvested agricultural produce to lengthen the period the households have food available during the whole year.

The QI team, with the support of the area Agricultural Extension Officer, proposed to mentor vulnerable households to establish and utilize three existing wetland areas along river banks in the Chilipa area. A total of 258 (44%) vulnerable families out of 587 were encouraged to participate in the wetland farming of cash crops to boost their household incomes and food availability throughout the year to support their vulnerable children with basic needs at the household level.

As of September 2017, Mpeya QI team encouraged a total of 311 (54%) out of the 587 vulnerable households to rear small livestock at the household level such as chickens, pigs, rabbits, and goats to help groups of vulnerable families boost their economic wellbeing as well as improve their food security during lean periods of the year.

To boost the economic status of the vulnerable families, the QI team, through the support of the agricultural extension workers, sensitized vulnerable households to participate in Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) in the communities. Mpeya team facilitated formation of six VSL groups in the area and encouraged 240 (41%) vulnerable families to participate in the VSLA schemes in their targeted communities.

Mpeya QI team also linked vulnerable elderly guardians to other NGOs like CORDAID to benefit from goat pass on schemes, Save our Orphans Ministries to receive blankets for vulnerable children and social cash transfers from government cash transfer program. A total of 53% of vulnerable households were linked to these various organizations' supporting vulnerable populations.

Mpeya QI team, through their volunteers, encouraged vulnerable households to diversify their dietary intake by having kitchen gardens with various vegetables in their backyards to encourage their intake of nutritious meals, particularly for young children at the household level. This was done because it was noted that some vulnerable households tend to have children that are malnourished due to food shortages, lack of nutritional diversity, and the way they prepared meals at home. As of September 2017, 446 (76%) vulnerable families were encouraged and counselled on the importance of having a backyard kitchen garden as a household particularly for families with HIV positive family members as well as young children.

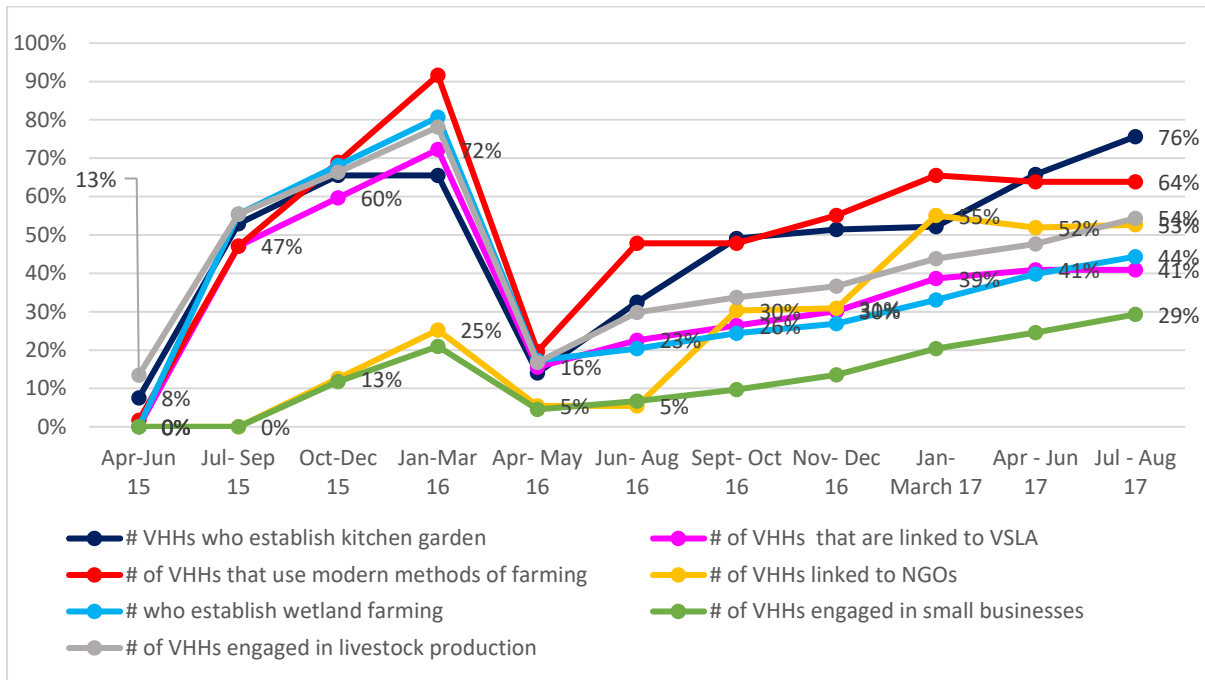
### **Results**

Between April 2015 and August 2017, Mpeya CBO achieved the following:

- Percentage of vulnerable households engaged in livestock production increased from 13% to 54%;
- Percentage of vulnerable households who had kitchen gardens increased from 8% to 76%;
- Percentage of vulnerable households who use modern methods of farming increased from 2% to 64%;
- Percentage of vulnerable households who had established wetland farming increased from 0 to 44%;

- Percentage of vulnerable households who are linked to and joined VSLA increased from 0 to 64%;
- Percentage of vulnerable households who are linked to and supported by NGOs increased from 0 to 53%;
- Percentage of vulnerable households who are engaged in small business increased from 0 to 29% (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: Percentage of vulnerable households linked to food security and household economic strengthening interventions in Mpeya CBO catchment area (Apr 2015-Aug 2017)**



Some of the changes that were tested were seen to have low uptake among vulnerable families such as starting small scale businesses which was heavily reliant on vulnerable families identifying some start-up capital. As a result, the QI team was encouraged by ASSIST to focus on promoting changes that the vulnerable guardians preferred.

### A story of self-reliance: One beneficiary's story

One of the beneficiaries of Mpeya QI team, Patuma Welesoni greatly commended the work the QI team does in the area.

Mrs Patuma Welesoni is a mother of six children. During a household field visit with the Ministry of Gender at her household she reported that she is now self-reliant after being taught and linked to over five interventions by Mpeya CBO and QI team. Usually in Malawi in September, most vulnerable families lack adequate food, particularly maize, the main staple food. This is not the case for Mrs Welesoni who still had enough maize in her silo to take her through the next growing season of 2017. She attributed this to Mpeya CBO who linked her to the area Agricultural Extension Worker and taught her the importance of participating in various social economic interventions such as wetland farming, kitchen gardens, VSLA, and livestock production. In 2013, the family was given a goat as part of a revolving goat pass on scheme by the CBO. She has benefited from this intervention since she is able to pay school fees for her secondary school child.

Mpeya CBO, through the support of ASSIST, has mentored her on the importance of joining a VSLA to boost their socio-economic status as a family. She is part of one of the Mpeya supported VSLAs and she expects to get proceeds from the VSLA to use to maintain her household before the rainy season.

Mrs. Welesoni was also referred by the QI team to join a PLHIV support group in the community to help her psychosocial wellbeing with her family while they interact with other support group members.

She said she is happy to be part of the support group and is even a chairlady. She reported that she has benefited a lot by interacting with other support group members in the village instead of facing daily depression. She is now healthy and can participate in any of the food security and economic strengthening activities which the QI team promotes in the area.

She also proudly commends the CBO's guidance through the Agriculture Extension Worker who taught her how to make compost manure to use in her garden. She attributes the high yield she had in 2016 to the compost manure and the modern methods of farming she applied to improve her crop productivity. Amazingly, she reported that before 2016 she has farmed in the same piece of land but always had persistent low yields but now she recommends the manure to other vulnerable guardians because she managed to fill up her silo with a good harvest in the 2016/2017 growing season. She appreciates the technical support rendered to her by Mpeya CBO.

Mrs. Welesoni also happily appreciates the support the CBO provided by linking her to a Health Surveillance Assistant for the area who assessed her last born child and found her to be moderately malnourished. Immediately she was linked to Chilipa Health Centre to enroll her into a Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit program. She happily reports that the child is now healthy and well recovered due to the support the CBO provided.

In addition, she has also planted a kitchen garden in her backyard to have access to fresh vegetables close to her house to help diversify their household dietary intake. Her five children are now at Nikisi Primary School regularly attending and thriving with good health. Her household is one of the 587 vulnerable households targeted by Mpeya QI team with various interventions in Traditional Authority Chilipa in Mangochi District.

### Lessons

The multi-sectoral QI team at the community level has brought services closer to vulnerable families to access technical knowledge and expertise on how to improve their wellbeing. Vulnerable families are comprehensively supported based on their specific needs rather than having packages of services which sometimes are not priority problems at the vulnerable household level.



The QI approach encourages vulnerable families to be self-reliant and figure out which interventions they want to participate in to improve their wellbeing as a family so that they do not rely on handouts which rarely come by in the communities now.

### Recommendations

CBOs should prioritize the use of QI approaches to improve how they ensure access and utilization of social services in the communities because it is a sustainable way of improving the vulnerable households' wellbeing and the CBO processes at the community level. Community structures should promote working with various existing government structures and other various stakeholders to provide sustainable comprehensive services for vulnerable families.

*Mpeya Agriculture Extension Worker presenting on HES activities during a QI coaching field visit in 2016, Photo by Tiwonge Moyo, ASSIST Malawi*

### Next steps

Following the successes of Mpeya QI team, the team the team has increased their targeted communities to target more vulnerable households with household economic strengthening interventions. The QI team has started sharing their experiences and lessons with other new CBOs from other new districts to spread their evidence based lessons in using QI methods to improve social services.



*Field exchange visit by 12 new teams to Mpeya CBO in Chilipa, Mangochi District. Photo by Tiwonge Chimbandule, ASSIST Malawi.*