

## **Chapter 3**

# **The Impact of Rural-Urban Migration on Household Food Security in Selected Villages in Chiradzulu and Mangochi Districts<sup>a</sup>**

Charles Chilimampunga

*Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi, Zomba, Malawi*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

There is ample evidence to show that agriculture continues to contribute significantly to economic growth and to the reduction of poverty and food insecurity. As Hazell (2005) points out, most of the countries that have failed to launch an agricultural revolution remain trapped in poverty, hunger, and economic stagnation. If Malawi, like most other African countries, is to achieve a significant level of socio-economic development, agricultural and rural development must be centre role.

Malawi's population is largely rural-based. The rural population represents about 80% of the national population. Over 90% of the rural labour force is directly engaged in agricultural activities, and most of these are smallholder farmers. The majority of the smallholder farmers are females. The productivity of smallholder farmers has been on the decline for some years now at the same time that the rate of rural-urban migration

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<sup>a</sup> Tsutomu Takane, ed., *Current Issues of Rural Development in Malawi* (Chiba, Japan: Institute of Developing Economies, 2006)

has been on the rise. There are many factors that explain this decline but the discussion of these is beyond the scope of this study.

Rural-urban migration is selective in favour of, for example, males over females, younger over older people, and the better educated over their poorly educated counterparts. The question that needs to be answered is: What impact, if any, does this migration have on food security in the sending areas? Admittedly, the traits of the migrants can have an indirect bearing on the level of food security at the rural household level. When large numbers of the more physically active and economically productive and educated members migrate, and farming is left in the hands of the old, weak and illiterate members of the household, rural households are likely to experience food shortages. But do remittances sent to the rural households by the migrants fail to compensate for the migrants absence?

This study examines the impact that migration from a rural area to an urban area has on food security among the sending households. It goes beyond looking at how migrants' demographic characteristics are associated with food security by examining the exchange relationship that exists between the migrants and their rural folks. In examining this relationship, it is important to realize that migration can at once respond to and influence the level of food security. In addition, it should be borne in mind that rural-urban migration is only one, and arguably minor but important, factor influencing food security at the household level. There are many other factors the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this study.

As Matiza et al (1989) point out, a conceptual problem arises when we examine the relationship between rural-urban migration and food security. They note that it is often not possible to distinguish between normal rural-urban migration which occurs regardless of the household's food supply situation, and migration specifically brought about by food insecurity. They also note that food insecurity may serve to hasten the decision to migrate in search of employment, and migration aimed specifically to mitigate food insecurity tends to be short-term, unlike the other type which may be life-long.

This study makes the assumption that much of the rural-urban migration that is occurring in rural Malawi is the normal rural-urban migration which occurs whether there is food security or insecurity in the

rural areas. As many studies have shown, this migration is influenced mostly by the perception that the town offers better social and economic opportunities than the village does.

The way food insecurity in rural areas influences migration or how households respond to food insecurity is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice to agree with Matiza et al (1989) that households respond to food insecurity by using locally available resources, and, as Chilimampunga (1992) found among Tengani villagers in Nsanje District, by one or more household members migrating to other areas in search of employment or food. In addition to migration to urban areas and other countries to seek better economic opportunities, Blarel (1994) observes that when food requirements are not satisfied, households pursue intensification of farming strategies, income-generating strategies, and off-farm employment or agricultural wage labour, and migration to other rural areas in search of better and/or more land.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This is an exploratory study and it utilized two main data collection techniques, namely a short household questionnaire and key informant interviews. A total of 100 heads of household and 5 key informants three of whom were village headwomen, were interviewed.

Chiradzulu and Mangochi districts were sampled purposively for three major reasons:

First, both Chiradzulu and Mangochi have a long history of out-migration to urban areas in Malawi. In the case of Mangochi only, there has been migration of significant numbers of young men to South Africa in more recent times. Many of them remain in South Africa for some years.

Second, in both districts over 80% of the population are small-scale farmers many of whom experience food shortages almost every year.

Third, the two districts have different important traits which may have a bearing on how out-migration to urban areas impact on household food security. Chiradzulu is the third most densely populated (308 persons per km<sup>2</sup> (NSO, 2002) district in Malawi. As a result of this high density, landholdings are small. Much of the population relies very heavily on

smallholder farming and migration to neighbouring Blantyre City for employment.

Mangochi is relatively sparsely populated (97 persons per km<sup>2</sup>) [NSO, 2002]. Unlike Chiradzulu, it has a broader economic base for sustaining livelihoods which includes irrigation farming, fish industry, and tourism. Although it does not share a boundary with a city, there is frequent movement of population between Mangochi and the urban areas of Zomba and Blantyre.

Data from a combination of these two different districts provides a more complete picture of the relationship between rural-urban migration and food security. This study does not make any comparisons between the two districts with respect to how the two variables are related.

In each of the districts, one Traditional Authority (TA) [TA Mpama in Chiradzulu and TA Mponda in Mangochi] was purposively chosen on the bases that it was expected to have significant numbers of out-migrants in part because of its proximity to a main road, and that it had villages with many households. Liwonde and Makalani villages in TA Mpama and Michesi village in TA Mponda were sampled purposively because they had relatively easy access to urban areas. Michesi village was chosen also because earlier visits had shown that there were subsistence farmers, fishers, and business persons in that village.

In each of the selected villages, the village headwoman<sup>1</sup> was interviewed as a key informant. Households were selected randomly beginning from the village headwoman's residence. Interviews were conducted with a total of 100 heads of household (50 from each district) and the three key informants on 28th May 2005 in Chiradzulu and on 11th June 2005 in Mangochi.

Because the size of the sample was small, very simple data analyses were carried out. It was not possible to carry out more robust statistical analyses. However, the frequencies that have been presented do show, to a large extent, what the general impact of rural-urban migration is on household food security. Where the size of the sub-sample is statistically small, the results must be interpreted with caution.

### **3.PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF PRINCIPAL FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Demographic characteristics of heads of household**

Most (67%) of the heads of household interviewed were males. The rest (33%) were females. The mean number of persons per household was 5.2 which is higher than the average of 4.0 persons in both Chiradzulu and Mangochi districts and the average of 4.4 persons for rural areas in Malawi (NSO, 2002). The mean number of persons per household was 6.1 and 4.7 among female-headed households and male-headed households respectively. It is known that female-headed households tend to host orphans more than male-headed households do.

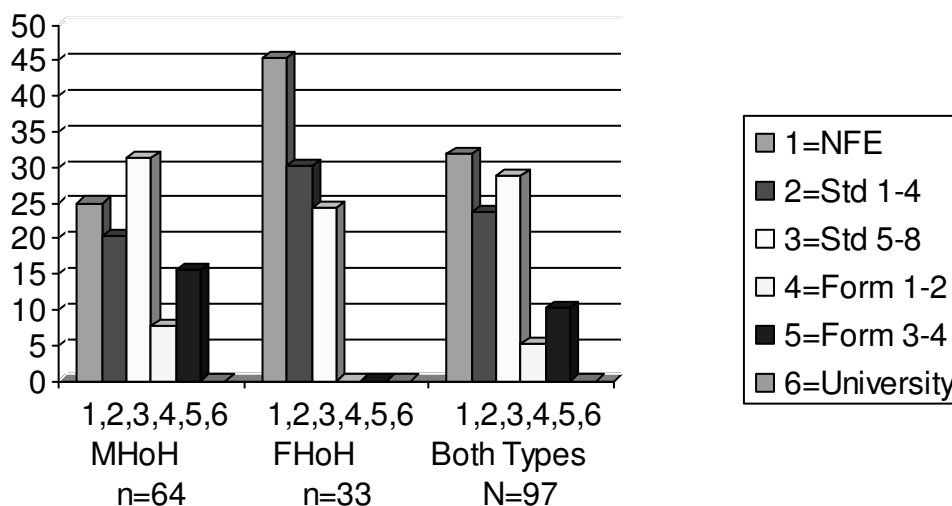
The majority (46%) of the heads of household were aged 20-39 years, followed by those aged 40-59 years (28%), and those aged 60 years and over (25%). None was under 20 years old. This shows that most (74%) of the heads of household were in the economically active age-group.

Most (71%) of the heads of household were married, but the percentage was much higher among male heads of household (92.5%) than among their female counterparts (27.3%). The majority (48.5%) of the female heads of household were widowed. It is more common in this and other areas of Malawi, for men than it is for women to remarry.

The education status of the population of Mangochi district in particular is low. For example, adult literacy is only 44.0% in Mangochi compared to 71.1% in Chiradzulu district.<sup>2</sup> The national adult literacy rate is 64.1%. The low education status of the population in the area was reflected in the sample, as Figure 1 shows. The majority (32%) of the heads of household had no formal education. Only 16% had some secondary school education.

The figure clearly indicates that the female-heads of household were more poorly educated than their male counterparts. For example, the percentage of the heads of household without formal education was as high as 45.5% among the females, compared to 25% among the males. This is a reflection of the situation at the national level where 38.6% and 26.1% of females and males, respectively, aged at least 5 years had never attended formal school (NSO, 2002).

**Figure 1: Education status of male and female heads of household, by percentage**



Note: MHoH= Male heads of household;  
 FHoH= Female heads of household;  
 NFE= No Formal Education;  
 Std= Standard.

Almost all of the heads of household were subsistence farmers. Maize is the staple crop for almost all the households. The major crops that they grow are maize which was grown by 93% of the households, pigeon peas (28%), beans (25%), groundnuts (22%), sorghum (12%), sweet potatoes (10%), vegetables (11%), tobacco (8%), guinea peas (5%), and cassava (4%). About 75% of the farmers grow two or more crops one of which is maize. There was no difference between households with and those without migrants, with respect to the types of crop grown.

As the percentages above show, very few or none of the households grow staple food crops like cassava, rice and millet. There is so much dependence on maize that when this crop fails due to whatever reasons such as poor rains and pests, most of the households complain that they do not have enough food even when they have harvested a lot of potatoes and cassava. In addition, very few of the households grow tobacco or any other major cash crop such as cotton that could bring extra income

into the household. However, it is not uncommon for households or individuals to sell food crops such as maize, groundnuts, and cassava when their cash flow is low. Sometimes this is done even when the stocks are low.

Most (78.9%) of the households rear livestock such as goats, chickens, guinea fowl, and ducks. There was no difference between households with migrants and those without, in terms of the percentage of households that rear livestock (78.9% each).

### **3.2 Demographic profile of rural-urban migrants**

Out of the 100 households sampled only 21 (21%) had at least one member who had migrated to an urban area. The 21 households sent 37 people to urban areas. This means that, on average, each of these 21 households sent nearly 2 members to town. This study found that, although a few of the households became female-headed households as a result of migration, female-headed households were more likely to be the source of rural-urban migrants than their male counterparts. Rural-urban migrants from the 33 female-headed households accounted for 48.5% of these households while those from the 67 male-headed households accounted for 31.3% of such households. The migrants accounted for 7.1% of the population of the sampled households.

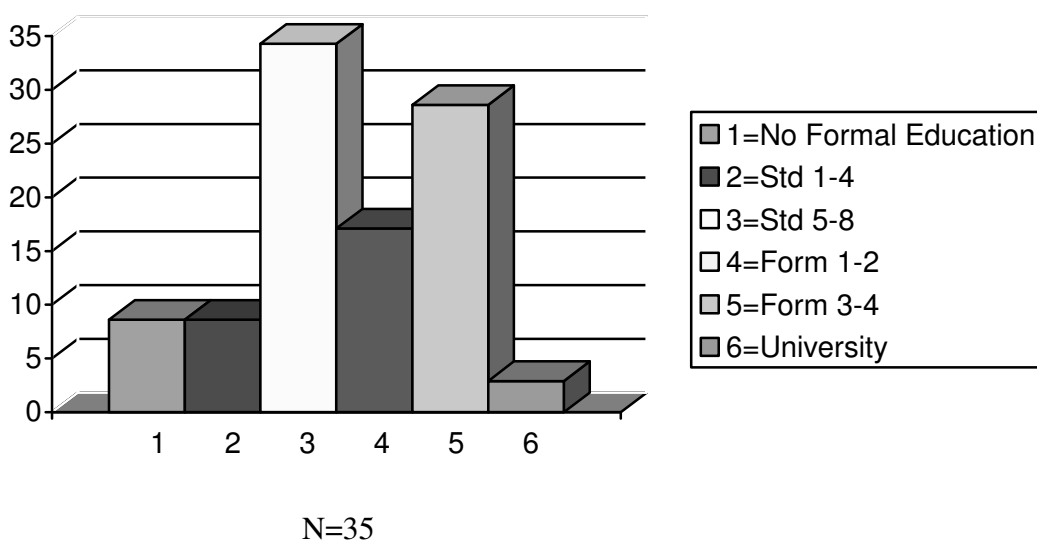
A little over half (51.4%) of the migrants were male. This indicates that, at least in the villages sampled, out-migration to urban areas is not significantly selective in favour of males over females. The easy accessibility of the urban areas from the villages visited may account for the small difference between the males' and the females' percentages. In addition, it may be in part due to the fact that the villages where this study was done are matrilineal where the females may have more liberty to make the decision on their own to migrate than in some other settings where females' movement is under closer surveillance.

Most (53.3%) of the migrants were in the 20-39 age-category, followed by those aged under 20 years (26.7%), and those in the 40-59 year age-category (20%). None of the migrants was aged 60 years and over. Generally, the migrants were younger than the non-migrant heads of household. Most (69.7%) of the migrants were married while the rest (30.3%) had never married, and none was divorced or widowed at the time

they were interviewed. This study did not establish whether the migrants migrated alone or with their spouses.

Figure 2 indicates that the majority (34.3%) of the rural-urban migrants had Standard 5-8 education. The education status of the migrants was generally higher than that of the heads of household (non-migrant heads of household). For instance, the percentage of those without formal education was as high as 32% among the heads of household, but only 8.6% among the migrants.

**Figure 2: Education status of rural-urban migrants, by percentage**



The reasons for migrating included search for employment (65.2%), marriage (17.1%), and education (8.6%). Many of those who went in search for employment were reported not to have secured any job despite having stayed in town for many years. The large majority of those migrants who were working were in low-paying jobs. Virtually all of those who left due to marriage were female. The youth tended to leave the village in order to access better secondary school education in town. None of the respondents reported that shortage of food was the reason why the migrant(s) left for the urban area(s). However, it is possible that poverty



and the attendant hunger were the underlying causes of the migration of some of the migrants.

Not surprisingly, Blantyre attracted most (70%) of the migrants since it is very close to Chiradzulu and, more importantly, it is the major commercial city in Malawi. The rest went to Lilongwe (15%), Mzuzu (10%) and Zomba (5%). As Table 1 shows, at the time of the field data collection, the majority (37.1%) had lived in these urban areas for 5 to less than 10 years.

**Table 1: Migrants’ length of stay in urban areas, by percentage**

Length of Stay (years)	< 1	1< 3	3< 5	5<10	10 or more	N
%	2.9	17.1	22.9	37.1	20.0	35

Rural-urban migrants seem to have one foot in the village and the other in the town but they are almost always facing the village. They depend very much on the village for their livelihood, and as van Velsen (1969: 232) long observed:

*it is relatively unimportant whether they have lived for one, ten, or twenty years with or without intervals in their village, in the town if they rely for their security on their village society, after their limited security of urban employment has come to an end.*

#### **4. ASSESSMENT OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION’S IMPACT ON FOOD SECURITY**

The linkage between town and village is well established in Malawi and it can be strengthened or weakened by rural-urban migration among other processes. This study established that the frequency and intensity of the contacts between the two as a result of rural-urban migration is significant. More importantly, the relationship between urban-

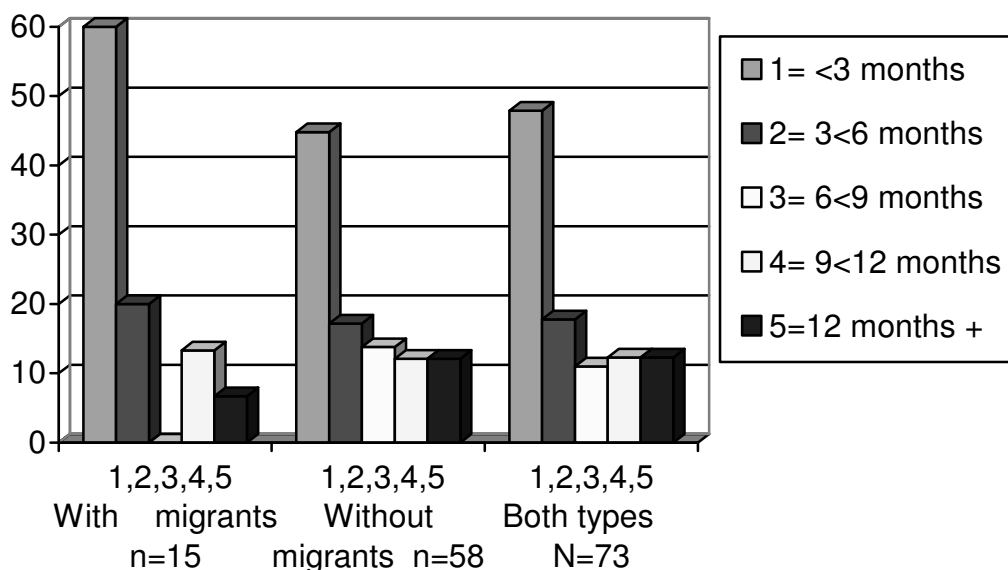
based migrants and their rural folks can result in an increase in the vulnerability of the latter to food insecurity. Analysis of data from the villages that were visited reveals two opposite impacts of rural-urban migration on household food security.

#### 4.1 Negative impact of rural-urban migration on food security

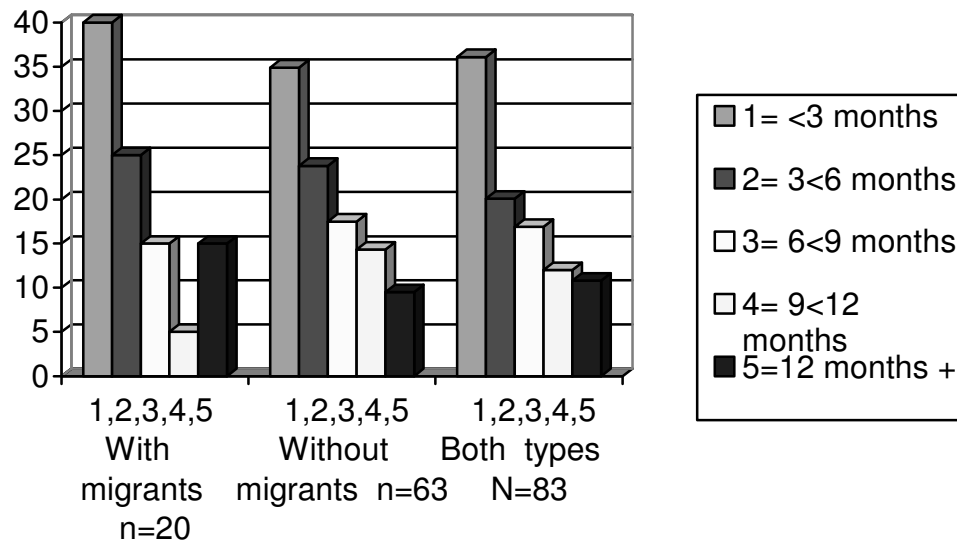
The departure of people from the villages to the towns can have negative impacts on the level of food security at household level. Figures 3, 4, and 5 show that, other things being equal, households with urban-based migrants are more likely to face food shortages than their counterparts without such migrants.

The level of food insecurity is crudely measured here using the length of time food lasted in the household after harvest during the 2002, 2003 and 2004 seasons. Admittedly, not all households who run out of harvested food before the next harvest arrives are food insecure. However, many of such households are poor and they have few viable and sustainable alternative sources of food or income other than *ganyu* (piece work).

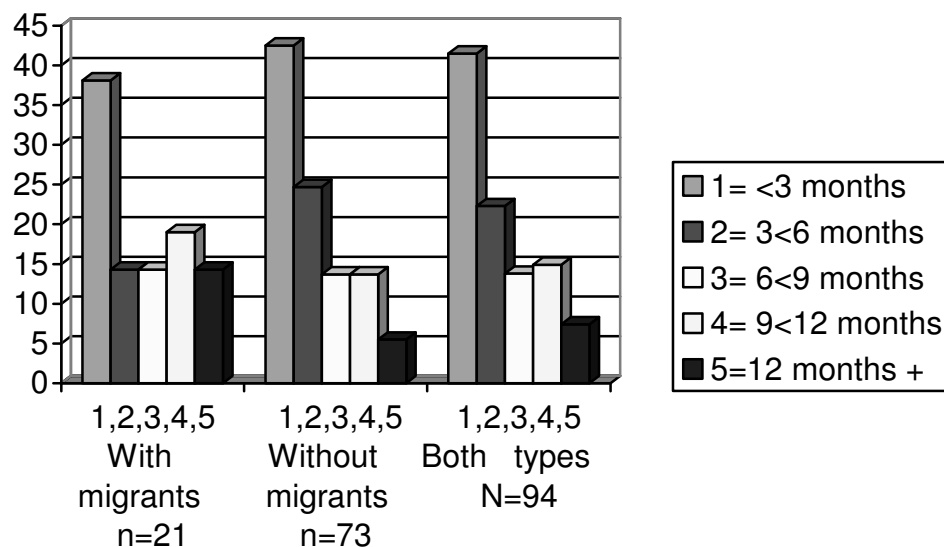
**Figure 3: Length of time food lasted after 2002 harvest, by type of household**



**Figure 4: Length of time food lasted after 2003 harvest, by type of household**



**Figure 5: Length of time food lasted after 2004 harvest, by type of household**



In each of the three seasons and irrespective of the type of household, the majority of the households had food that lasted less than 3 months after it was harvested. The picture that emerges from the 2002 and 2003 seasons suggests that households with migrants are more likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity than those without migrants. In 2004, the opposite appears to be the case. One explanation for this difference is that in 2002 and 2003 seasons, rainfall was closer to normal than in 2004 when harvests were remarkably poorer than in the first two seasons.

The year 2004 may not be the ideal season in which meaningful comparisons on food security levels can be made among the different types of household. One can speculate that, being better educated and with better access to income than their rural counterparts, a significant percentage of migrants bought and supplied their rural folks with early-maturing and more drought tolerant seed varieties of maize and other crops in that year when indications were that there would be poor rains. Households without such migrants were at a disadvantage in this respect.

But why are households with migrants more vulnerable than those without migrants? This is the major question that this paper addresses.

The reasons that were most frequently mentioned by the heads of household as to why their harvests were poor were that they did not apply any or enough fertilizer because the prices were beyond their reach and/or that it was not available on the local market (44.9%), poor rains (32.7%), shortage of arable land (6.8%), and infertile land and destruction of crops by elephants (4.8% each).

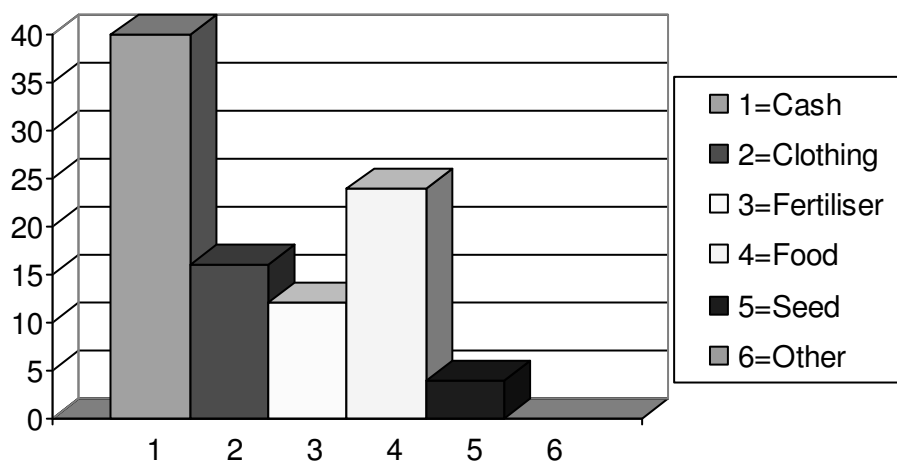
When comparisons were made between households with rural-urban migrants and those without such migrants, it was found that lack of access to, or unavailability of, fertilizer was mentioned more often by the latter (68.4%) than by the former (51.7%) as reasons why their yields were poor. In addition, households without migrants mentioned that their household was big [too many mouths to feed] (4.4%) and that it had poor access to seed (2.9%) as some of the reasons.

The last two reasons above were not mentioned by the households with migrants. This is a reflection of the fact pointed earlier that these households are smaller and have better access to farm inputs than those without migrants. On the basis of these findings alone, it can tentatively be

said that households without migrants are more likely to experience low crop production than their counterparts who have migrants in urban areas.

The respondents were asked if the migrants sent any material assistance to the household over the period they were away. Most (53%) of them admitted that they received such assistance. As Figure 6 shows, the most frequently mentioned assistance came in the form of cash which was reported by 40% of the heads of household who said that they receive assistance.

**Figure 6: Type of material assistance from migrants, by percentage**



N=53

In his study, Tsoka (2003) also found that remittances are a major source of income for many rural households particularly when they are hunger stricken, and that cash was the main gift item they received. Other gifts included grain, clothing, and other food. In his later study on cross-border migrants from Malawi, Tsoka (2005) also found that remittances were a major source of income for a majority of the households from where the international migrants came.

Only 12% and 4% said fertiliser and seed, respectively, which are vital inputs that would help increase farm productivity. This explains, in part, why a significant percentage (44.9%) of these households mentioned

lack of access to, or unavailability of, fertilizer as one reason why their harvests were poor.

It was reported by key informants that migrants tend to send very little money a high percentage of which was spent on daily basic needs such as food. Given that, as Figure 2 showed, most (51.5%) of the migrants had primary or no formal education, it is not surprising that the migrants sent very little money. With low education qualifications, the income of most of the migrants was low. In fact many rural-urban migrants are in the poorly paying informal sector. Generally, the money the migrants sent home was spent on purchasing farm inputs except when the money is specifically earmarked by the migrant for that purpose and only in the absence of immediate and more pressing needs.

It should be noted that when cash or farm inputs such as seed and fertilizer are sent by migrants, it is not guaranteed that the farmer will invest them in his/her field. Such a decision will depend on, among other considerations, whether he/she feels that the cost of investment will be outweighed by the expected net returns from the investment. It is sometimes for this reason that farmers sell their starter packs of seed and/or fertilizer.

Tsoka (2003) makes a very important observation regarding the relationship between the level of hunger and the kinds of gift households receive from donors some of whom are family members. He observes that, generally, when the level of food insecurity drops, the amount of food donations and money earmarked for food for the recipient household also declines. This suggests that, generally, donors assess the needs of the recipients and/or that the households assess their situation and solicit the appropriate assistance.

Another crucial consideration is security of land tenure. As Carter et al (1994) note, the farmer's perception of the probability that he or she could maintain rights over the field for the duration of the investment is an important variable in the equation. Generally, the higher the perception of tenure security, the higher would be the farmer's expected net returns to the investment.

As in Chiradzulu and Mangochi, in some matrilineal societies where descent is traced through the matriline and husbands reside uxorilocally, the point raised by Carter et al (1994) above probably

explains, at least in part, why many of the adult migrants, the majority of whom are male who have married and live in the wife's village (*akamwini*),<sup>3</sup> have little incentive to make capital long-term improvements of the land, such as agroforestry and irrigation, that could raise land productivity. However, such migrants may make short-term investments on land by remitting fertilizer or seed for one season.

As Figure 6 showed, only a small proportion of the migrants made long-term investments. In fact, as mentioned earlier, there is no difference between households with migrants and those without them, with respect to types of crop grown and livestock reared. This suggests that the migrants are indeed not making long-term investments. Under ideal circumstances, one would expect a higher percentage of the households with migrants to grow cash crops such as tobacco and paprika, to rear livestock such as cattle, goats and sheep. While low income may be a major prohibitive factor, insecurity of tenure is often the factor that holds many potential investors back from making long-term investments.

From what Carter et al (1994) observe, it can be concluded that a similar incentive problem may arise if the migrants are not assured that the benefits from improvements that they make to the land will accrue to them, their children and/or to their other blood relations. Residing away from the village for long durations without intervals in the village only makes the *akamwini* migrants more detached physically and, more importantly, socially, economically and psychologically. Their feeling of alienation from the wives' villages sometimes makes them turn their attention to their village of origin where they feel there is more security.

The departure of a migrant who was very productive and made significant contribution to food production and income-generation, as is often the case, can have adverse impacts on food security at the household level. In addition, the departure of a migrant does not always mean a reduction of mouths to feed because migrants, sometimes including their spouses and children, tend to visit their villages on a regular basis particularly where distance is not prohibitive. Indeed, as many as 89.5% of the heads of household with migrants reported that the migrants do visit them. Most (52.9%) of these respondents said that they are visited frequently while the rest (47.1%) said rarely.

Rural-urban migrants who settle or intend to settle permanently in the towns and completely abandon their rural areas of origin are the exception rather than the rule. They make the visits not only because accessibility is easy, that the conditions in the town are poor, or merely to collect food, but most importantly because they want to maintain social and economic relationships with their traditional systems. The migrants are, in a sense, not “urbanized” since they do not give up completely their village life and their dependence on the economic and social system of their village. They want to ensure that they can fall back on the village when life in town becomes unbearable to them.

As is common in virtually all rural areas in Malawi, when a household member visits, he/she is given some food items such as grain or flour and potatoes to take back to town. Also, when a villager visits relatives in town it is more often than not that he/she brings with him/her such food items. When the migrant lives in town with friends or he/she marries in town and has children, the rural household may have more mouths to feed than was the case before the decision to migrate was effected.

More seriously, as Drinkwater (2005) observes, migrants are often the first victims of HIV/AIDS. When they begin suffering, they are unable to send remittances and it is often the rural households that must support them in their illness. This means that a lot of time, food, money and other resources that could have been devoted to farm activities or used in the rural household are spent on the patient. When the migrant dies, the number of mouths to be fed by the rural household rises by the number of orphans left.

Although the relationship between the two is symbiotic, generally, the material exchange is in favour of the rural-urban migrants. This study did not investigate the quantity or quality of food items exchanged. However, at least as far as the quantity is concerned, generally migrants take away much more from the village than they invest in it whenever they pay a visit. This is true for almost all areas in Malawi. The common argument raised by the migrants for remitting less than what they take away from the village is that town life is expensive and that they live under hard financial difficulties. The feeling among many poor rural-urban migrants is, as one female key informant in Chiradzulu put it, that



*we rural people grow our own food and we have plenty of it. They have to buy their food but they have no money. That's what they think. But we run out of food almost as soon as we harvest it and we also need money.*

This feeling makes many rural-urban migrants make frequent visits to the villages for the purpose of collecting food. To some extent, the data in Table 2 which is about the frequency of giving and receiving food items, supports the point made above. Most (61.9%) of the migrants do not give food items to their rural-based relations. The majority of the migrants from the sampled districts are either unemployed or earn too little incomes to buy food items for their rural-based relations. Also, as the quotation above suggests, the perception of many people is that there is abundant food in the rural areas, yet there are clear indications that there is food insecurity in most rural areas.

Most (76%) of the rural households do not give food items to the migrants. This percentage is high because most of the households do not harvest enough food crops for them to afford to donate to the migrants or anyone.

**Table 2: Reciprocity between households and migrants**

Exchange of Food Items	% Households
Give food items to migrants	24.0
Receive food items from migrants	38.1
Often give food items to migrants	37.5
Often receive food items from migrants	33.3
Give food items rarely	62.5
Receive food items rarely	66.7

It is clear that, assuming that migrants initiate the exchange relationship, households that are assisted by migrants have a higher likelihood of reciprocating the assistance than those that are not assisted.

Simple analysis of the data shows that the percentage of households that assisted migrants was higher among households that received assistance from the migrants (50%) than among those that did not receive such assistance (22.2%). When the assumption is that households are the initiators of the exchange relationship, it is found that migrants that get help are more likely to reciprocate the assistance (75.0%) than those who do not receive such help (46.2%).

As van Velsen (1969: 237) noted among the Tonga of Malawi, both the migrants and their rural folks

*see their respective services on a reciprocal basis. The labour migrant sees his contributions of cash and goods to the rural economy as a kind of insurance premium: "How can we expect our abali (kin, friends) to help us later when we are old, if we do not help them now?"*

The rural households also want to maintain the relationship especially for the sake of the children who one day might have to be sent to town to seek better education or employment. When they do send the children to live with the urban relatives, the rural households are generally expected to send food items regularly.

Most respondents who do not give out food items, said it is because they do not have surplus food. This is not to say that the households that donate food items have surplus food. On the contrary, many of them give away what they don't have. It is not uncommon for households to beg or borrow food items from other households in order to donate to urban-based relations, thereby worsening their (the donor household's) food insecurity.

Households that were assisted by migrants were worse off than their counterparts who did not receive any material assistance from migrants. In 2002, the percentage of households that harvested food crops that lasted less than 12 months was higher among households that received assistance (90.9%) than among those that did not (88.8%). The picture was similar in 2003 when the percentages were 90.9% and 77.8% respectively, and in 2004 when the percentages were 100% and 66.7% respectively. How can assistance have a negative impact?

The explanation for this apparent paradox is that, as it was suggested earlier, households that are assisted by migrants feel obliged to reciprocate the assistance. Sometimes migrants give assistance either with the motive of later on asking for help from the recipient or in the hope that they will get help in return. Often, the rural households give out more food items than they receive items such as farm inputs from the migrants. Sometimes, the households relax and wait for such help which may never come, or when it comes it is too little and/or too late to have a positive impact on crop productivity.

The situation of the rural households with migrants is a precarious one given that, as Tsoka (2003) found in his study, some cash gifts, and indeed some gifts in general, are unsolicited. This can be a problem in two ways.

First, as Tsoka (2003: 41) points out,

*“parents and the elderly are fond of relying on the proverb ‘patse patse n’kulanda mwana wamfulu apatsa yekha’ (You do not have to say give me give me, because if you do so you are forcing matters; a good donor gives without being asked). They rarely beg but simply believe their children or donors know their problems and that they would give them the money unsolicited.”*

But this ‘politeness’ can result in the rural households experiencing acute shortage of food when begging from their family members could save them from hunger. There is no guarantee that the migrant, or anyone else for that matter, knows or will at some point know, about the plight of the household and voluntarily come forward to assist it.

Second, unsolicited gifts may come in different kinds, quantities and qualities that may not be tandem with the requirements of the recipient. Although as Tsoka (2003) found, money donated to buy food follows food insecurity patterns, sometimes migrants donate clothing or salt when food is what the recipient desperately needs. Also, timeliness of the unsolicited gifts cannot be assured. For instance, key informants noted that hybrid maize seed is sometimes donated when the household has already planted

low yielding maize variety or fertilizer is sent well after the rains have stopped.

The percentage of households that harvested food crops lasting less than 12 months was higher among those that assisted migrants with food than among their counterparts who did not extend such assistance to migrants (91.7% and 83.3% respectively in 2002; 91.7% and 66.7% in respectively in 2003; and 85.7% and 83.3% respectively in 2004). What this suggests is that by helping migrants, the households were making themselves vulnerable to food insecurity.

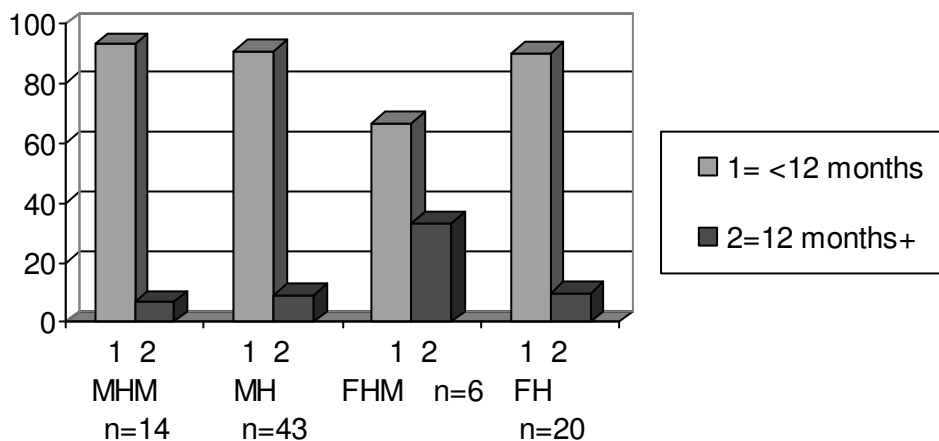
From the findings presented above, it is clear that there is an unequal relationship between urban-based migrants and their rural-based folks as far as the exchange of goods, particularly food items, is concerned. While each depends on the other for its livelihood, the latter is exploited to the extent that, other things being equal, the longer and closer the relationship is, the more the household is likely to be food insecure. The situation facing a household with migrants is exacerbated by the multiplicity of relationships of that nature, that is, where several members of the household have migrated to town.

Unlike some other exchange relationships which are terminated when one party feels that justice is not in its favour or that justice is not equally distributed between the two parties, this type of relationship tends to endure. It can be argued that it is only when the migrants are husbands who are *akamwini* who migrated alone that such an exploitative relationship is vulnerable to quick termination.

#### **4.2 Positive impacts of rural-urban migration on food security**

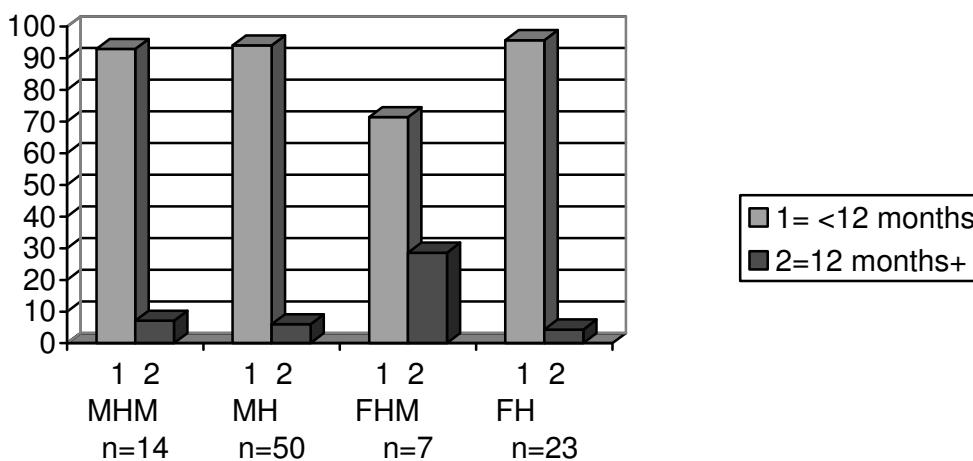
This study found that, other things being equal, female-headed households with urban-based migrants are more likely to be food secure than their counterparts without such migrants. It is clear from Figures 7 and 8 that in both 2003 and 2004 seasons, the percentage of households that harvested food lasting less than 12 months was about the same (90% to 93% in 2003 and 93% to 96% in 2004) for all types of household with the exception of female-headed households with rural-urban migrants (about 71.4%).

**Figure 7: Length of time harvested food lasted after the 2003 harvest, by type and percent of household**



Note: MHM= Male-headed households with migrants.  
 MH= Male-headed households without migrants.  
 FHM= Female-headed households with migrants.  
 FH= Female-headed households without migrants.

**Figure 8: Length of time harvested food lasted after the 2004 harvest, by type and percent of household**



Note: MHM= Male-headed households with migrants.  
 MH= Male-headed households without migrants.  
 FHM= Female-headed households with migrants.  
 FH= Female-headed households without migrants

Female-headed households that send out migrants to urban areas are less vulnerable to food insecurity than the other types of household. This appears surprising, especially given that in the sample, female-headed households were larger than their male counterparts, and also that the education status of female heads of household is lower than that of their male counterparts as this study has shown. Rural-urban migration tends to leave women and children to tend the fields. Studies have shown that female-headed households are more vulnerable to food insecurity than male-headed households.

Milner (2005) isolates some of the labour constraints facing smallholder farmers in Malawi and observes that these are more acute particularly among female farmers with less than one hectare of land. The constraints faced by female farmers include the following:

- Poor access to farm inputs and improved technologies that can help them improve their productivity and crop processing;
- Limited time available for farm activities as a result of home-making and child-rearing responsibilities that are at the centre of women's lives;
- Income generating activities that women have to engage in order to support their families financially;
- Poor access to credit because women do not have collateral (they hardly own property (in some areas this includes land));
- High illiteracy rate which makes it hard for women not only to access credit but also to adopt improved technologies; and
- High maternal morbidity and mortality.

Given these facts, the question to ask is: Why are female-headed households with rural-urban migrants less vulnerable to food insecurity than female-headed households without rural-urban migrants and, more importantly, male-headed households with or without migrants?

Some explanations can be given here. First, in Chiradzulu, because of high population density, farm sizes are generally small. Other factors remaining constant, the departure of productive members tends to have little impact on the productivity of the land since only a small family labour force is required to manage the farm.

Second, in Mangochi, *dimba* (wetland) gardening of vegetables and other crops is common along some parts of Lake Malawi and Lake Malombe. Such gardening is often done by women while a significant percentage of the men are out fishing, trading in fish or working in the tourist lodges. Therefore, migration of some members (mostly males) may not have much negative impact on household food security among female-headed households.

Third, this study established that migrants are more likely to assist female-headed households than male-headed households. In fact, the exchange relationship between migrants and their rural households tends to be more in favour of the latter than the former. It seems that female heads of households receive more sympathetic responses from the migrants than their male counterparts do.

Female-headed households with migrants are also smaller than female-headed households without migrants. The departure of migrants from the village can mean a reduction of the number of mouths to be fed on a daily basis in the rural household. Other things being equal, the departure of some member(s) of the household could result in stretching food reserves longer.

Fourth, studies have shown that females play a vital role in farm activities despite the constraints they face as pointed out earlier. In female-headed households, especially in matrilineal societies like the ones in Chiradzulu and Mangochi, the head has more freedom to make her own decisions as to when to begin what farm activity and to organize her time and other non-farm activities accordingly. In other words, she is not so much tied down to reproductive activities as she would have been if the head was a male who makes decisions within the household on a daily basis.

In addition, “the spouse (generally the wife) is reported to be a final decision maker in issues like ... the amount of food eaten in the household” (Tsoka, 2003:14). Once the crops have been harvested, an average female head of household is likely to think about storing and preserving even the little that is harvested. An average male head of household, under similar circumstances, would probably sell some of the harvest and spend the money on non-food items and services such as drink, gambling and women.

The freedom for the female head of household to make her own decisions is more likely to occur in households which have sent some members to town than in those that have not. In the latter households, it is likely that the adult males are present. Such males may include young men (sons), unmarried uncles, and other relations who often make decisions on behalf of the husband who is away. In the former households, the adult males are the majority of those who have migrated to town.

Although most (66.7%) of the heads of household with migrants said that they rarely received the assistance, and irrespective of the kind of assistance received, there was some, albeit little and sometimes indirect, positive impact on food security at the household level. When a household receives blankets or cash to pay for the purchase of roofing material, for example, it could mean that that household can divert some of its resources meant for these expenditures to the purchase of food or farm inputs.

## **5. HOW TO REDUCE FOOD INSECURITY IN LIGHT OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION**

Rural-urban migration in Malawi is likely to continue in the foreseeable future and there is the trend is likely to continue as long as urban areas are perceived to be places where a better life can be enjoyed than in rural areas. Nevertheless, rural development should be one of the major focuses of the government's efforts to improve food security in the rural areas. As Hazell (quoted in Bryant, 2005:11) argues,

*expecting poor countries to quickly generate enough productive nonfarm jobs to pull large numbers of workers out of farming is totally unrealistic. If agricultural growth and small farms are neglected, then a mass exodus of small farmers could simply overwhelm countries in terms of the social, political, and environmental problems this will create.*

Hazell (quoted in Bryant, 2005:11) says that “the relevant question is not do you give up on small farms, but what can you do to help them seize new opportunities.” There is a lot that rural-urban migrants and other stakeholders can do to help smallholder farmers improve their food security.



## 5.1 Rural infrastructure

As Hazell (2005:10) rightly observes,

*increasing production of food staples is challenging for Africa because it has poor rural infrastructure and weak institutions to support agricultural development. Market access and transport costs are daunting obstacles to development. Modern technologies are simply not economic when farmers have to pay three to five times the world price for fertilizer and receive only 30-60 percent of the market value of their products. The problem has been compounded by structural adjustment programs that removed the public institutions and subsidies that provided farmers with affordable access to key inputs and markets.*

Like many other African countries, Malawi has poor rural infrastructure and the institutions that should be supporting agriculture remain weak. In the three villages covered in this study, the infrastructure is poor, particularly in the two villages in Chiradzulu.

### *Road networks*

Rural roads are of poor quality especially during the rain season. During this season it becomes difficult for farmers to transport their produce to the market. Investment in rural road infrastructure can contribute significantly to rural development in general and to rural household food security in particular. Good roads enable farmers to access markets for their agricultural produce. Moreover, good roads tend to bring the market closer to the farmer by making the rural community more accessible. In addition, such roads are likely to attract investors into the rural areas.

### *Rural transport*

Transport costs are an obstacle to rural development. As Glyvyns Chinkhuntha, a vegetable and fruit farmer in the central region of Malawi

observes, “good roads are not worth much without vans and other means to deliver their goods to the market” (quoted in Bryant, 2005: 11). In many rural areas of Malawi, the vans are conspicuous and in the few areas that they operate, the fares are too high for the poor farmer to afford. Because the farmer’s produce is unprocessed, he or she incurs high costs to transport it to the market. Major markets where agricultural produce fetches good prices are far away. For example, the nearest big market from the sampled two villages (Liwonde and Makalani) in Chiradzulu District is in Limbe (Blantyre City) which is about 15 kilometers away.

The bulkiness of the produce and the long distance to the market makes it almost impossible for the farmer to carry the produce on his or her head, to the market. Moreover, in the villages, most poor households do not own a bicycle. For example, in Chiradzulu and Mangochi districts only 35.1% and 41.4% of the households, respectively, own a bicycle (NSO, 2002). The average for rural Malawi is 42.4%. The bicycle is the most practical mode of transport in the rural areas which migrants can invest their money in. A durable bicycle given to a farming household can be used to access markets where agricultural produce can be sold and farm inputs can be bought.

Because of the long distance to markets, a lot of time that the farmer could have spent on some productive activity is spent traveling. When the transport costs and the time spent are taken into account, it is likely that the farmer loses more than he or she gains.

The bicycle can also be used to transport the farmer to the clinic when he or she falls sick. One major cause of low productivity of the smallholder farmers in Malawi is time spent off-farm due to illness. When the sick farmer is quickly taken to a clinic where he or she gets professional medical attention, his or her productivity on the farm is maximized. Rural-urban migrants can invest in rural transport by donating bicycles to their rural-based relations.

### *Markets*

Bryant (2005) points out that in some cases, investment in small-scale farming may mean moving away from subsistence agriculture to production for the market. But access to markets for agricultural produce is poor for most small-scale farmers. Most of the markets within a walking

distance are small, that is, they attract few potential customers. The majority of these customers are from within the area and they are, therefore, generally poor customers who are likely to offer only low prices for the produce.

It is important that small-scale farmers start thinking big. They must not only focus on the small markets within their areas. The rural-urban migrants can help these farmers to explore bigger markets in the urban areas. As Reardon (quoted in Bryant, 2005:11) says,

*the supermarket chain locally can be an export channel for local producers, as the chain supplies its stores in other countries*

The government needs to support these farmers if they are to compete with commercial farmers for these markets. When subsidies for the small farmers are removed, the small farmers are cut out of local and international markets. As Vink (quoted in Bryant, 2005:11) notes, “we know from past history that when African farmers have the opportunity to get into the market they don’t stay small. They can compete and become as industrial as anywhere in the world.”

## **5.2 Investment in education**

At 64.1% the adult literacy rate in Malawi is low.<sup>4</sup> The literacy rate is lower in rural areas (60%) than in urban areas (87.1%). In the rural areas, the literacy rate is lower among females (49.7%) than among males (71.4%). Of all 28 districts in Malawi, Mangochi records the lowest level of literacy (44% for both sexes, 57.5% for males, and 32.2% for females). For Chiradzulu district, the rate is 71.1% for both sexes, 81.5% for males, and 62.5% for females. As these percentages indicate, literacy levels are lower in rural than in urban areas, and lower among females than among males.

Poor human capacity is one major hindrance to improved agricultural productivity. Illiterate farmers cannot be expected to apply modern methods of farming. Very often they are unable to use and access new technologies such as treadle pumps, and technical information. There is need to improve the literacy levels in the rural areas, especially among

the females who are the major producers of food crops. Rural-urban migrants can support adult literacy classes by not only encouraging their relations to attend the classes but also by providing teaching and learning materials.

### **5.3 Improved access to farm inputs**

Rural-urban migrants do assist their rural relations, as this study has shown. What is required for them is to provide the kind of assistance that will help the recipients increase food security when there is need to do so. They can send high yielding seed varieties instead of low-yielding varieties, and fertilizer and pesticides where and when these are required. For this to happen, rural farmers must be able to solicit from the migrants what they require, and specify the quality, quantity, and the time they require it.

The farmers must see themselves as equal partners with their urban-based folks if they are to enjoy equal benefits from the relationship. In addition, rural communities must always consider their urban-based relations as full members of their households, at least as far as budgeting for and allocation of their food, and the general welfare of the household are concerned.

The government and the private sector must provide the very poor small farmers with access to essential farm inputs including fertilizer and seeds at subsidized costs or on credit basis. The findings of this study suggest that targeting women farmers for these inputs would be worthwhile. Women in the three villages not only play a major role in agriculture, but they also, generally, enjoy a relatively better security of tenure than their male folks and, therefore are more likely to invest the inputs in their farms.

### **5.4 Improved farm practices**

In the three villages that were visited, there was evidence of poor soil and water conservation methods. As a result, there is land degradation which is reducing the average agricultural productivity and capacity of the land. In many plots of land there was no evidence of box ridging, contour ridging, and agroforestation being practiced. Many farmers admitted that they do not apply organic fertilizer in their gardens. There is need for

extension officers to provide farmers with training on the use of these technologies.

Interviews with key informants revealed that many farmers, particularly the males, do not know how to preserve and store crops once they have harvested them. A great amount of grain and other types of crop is lost to rodents and other pests after harvesting. Over the years, much indigenous knowledge of how to preserve vegetables and other produce seems to have been lost. Using better methods of preserving and storing harvests will go a long way in reducing food insecurity in the rural households.

### **5.5 Diversification of income opportunities in rural areas**

Rural households lack off-farm income resources to protect their livelihoods against poor harvests and other shocks. Significant interventions from the government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and other stakeholders including the rural-urban migrants and rural non-migrants themselves, are needed to diversify income opportunities. There is ample evidence that in Malawi, there has been a shift from rural households being net sellers of food (especially the staple maize) to households being net buyers. When they have no cash to buy food, the households become highly vulnerable to hunger. Food aid to households is unsustainable, and it tends to promote a dependency syndrome.

Investment in rural industries, such as textile industries or food processing factories, is likely to create job opportunities for rural people, and reduce the rate of rural-urban migration. More importantly, farmers will be encouraged to produce more food some of which can be sold to the factories. While better access to off-farm income is likely to improve household income and reduce vulnerability to food insecurity, it may also reduce incentives for food production (Holden, et al., 2005).

### **5.6 Improving the quality of rural life in general**

Improving the quality of life in the rural areas will help to encourage people to live in rural areas. There is need for the government to improve the health status of rural people by, among other things, increasing the number of health facilities and personnel, and improving households'

access to potable water. There is need for the government and the private sector to provide important services such as the police in order to increase the sense of security among rural dwellers, public transport and communication services including post offices, and rural electrification including solar systems.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Migration from the village to towns can at once have negative and positive impacts on food security at the level of the sending household. Whether the overall impact is beneficial to the rural household or not depends on many factors including the quantity, quality and frequency of assistance exchanged between the migrants and the rural household. In a nutshell, it depends on how unequal, unbalanced or exploitative the relationship of reciprocity is.

Each of the two parties strives to maintain the relationship more for anticipated future benefits than for immediate gratification. This is particularly true for the rural household. At the regional level, it can be proposed that how the level of food security in a rural area is affected by out-migration to urban areas, or to any other areas for that matter, is a function of the nature of the relationship between the sending and the receiving areas.

Rural-urban migration and the exchange relationship between migrants and their rural folks are likely to continue. Very little can be done to curb rural-urban migration as long as urban areas are viewed by significant numbers of rural-based people as “the better place to live in.” However, more investment in the rural areas is likely to reduce the rate at which people leave the rural areas for urban areas.

It is in the interest of the migrants to invest more in rural agriculture by not only sending remittances in the form of farm inputs such as fertilizer and high-yielding seed, but also by making long-term investments in their own farms, irrigation farming, and agroforestry. That way, the migrant will be repeating where he/she sowed and the benefits from such investment are likely to spill over into the larger household. However, this long-term investment is unlikely to happen unless the migrant perceives that he/she has secure land tenure.

It is the role of government, the private sector and other stakeholders to invest in rural areas. Improvement of food security in the rural areas should be perceived within the context of rural development. Rural development will benefit not only rural people but urban people and the whole country as well.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The head of each of these villages was a woman. This is probably a reflection of the fact that the study areas are matrilineal.

<sup>2</sup> Adult literacy is defined as the ability of an individual aged at least 15 years, to read and write a simple statement in at least one language.

<sup>3</sup> "Akamwini" is the plural form of "mkamwini" which literally translates into "someone else's."