

Community Perspectives on Linkages between Population Growth, Family Planning, Health and Food Security

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

In 2016–2017 FANTA conducted qualitative formative research with the USAID Office of Food for Peace (FFP)-funded Njira development food security activity implemented by Project Concern International and Emmanuel International in Balaka and Machinga districts in Malawi.

The study was conducted to inform the strategic design of the family planning activities within Njira. It was also intended to serve as a proof of concept to generate learning more broadly on a process to help understand how to best integrate FP into development food security activities.

This brief is one of a series of four and presents findings from one of three research objectives. Additional findings and an overview of the study and methods used are available at www.fantaproject.org/FPintegration.

Introduction

Over half of the population in Malawi is under 19 years, and the overall population is expected to grow from 17 to 41 million by 2040 (Brent, Naik, Pappa & Sacher 2017). Close to three-quarters (70 percent) of the country's population lives in extreme poverty, over a third of children under 5 are stunted, and in 2017, one million people faced food insecurity (Brent, Naik, Pappa & Sacher 2017; National Statistical Office Malawi 2017). While fertility rates have declined, the unmet need for family planning (FP) among married women is 18.7 percent and among sexually active unmarried women it is 39.8 percent (NSO 2017). In addition to improving reproductive health and nutrition outcomes, voluntary FP can also improve food security by reducing fertility rates and slowing

the pace of population growth, thereby reducing strains on food needs and limited agricultural resources (USAID 2015).

This brief presents qualitative formative research findings on how community members in Balaka and Machinga districts in Malawi (see box) perceive the linkages between population growth, FP, health, and food security. The primary data sources for findings discussed are four focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of community groups engaged in Njira development food security activities (DFSA) including Water Point Committees, farmer producer groups, and women's empowerment (WE) groups; and 4 semi-structured interviews (SSIs) conducted with community leaders or Village Civil Protection Committee (VCPC) members. Additional insights are drawn from other study data sources as relevant, including FGDs and SSIs with mothers and fathers of young children who are members of Care Groups and Father Groups; adolescents and young people 18–24 years old who belong to youth groups; facility- and community-based government health providers; and activity/project informants. Details on the study methods can be found in Research [Brief 1](#). Study findings on demand and supply side factors affecting FP are discussed in [Briefs 2 and 3](#), respectively.

Key Findings

Perceived changes in environment and community. Group members belonging to producer groups, WE groups, Water Point Committees, and VCPC (hereinafter referred to as community members) were asked what changes they had experienced in their community and in the environment in recent years. These changes are summarized in Table 1. The four environmental changes respondents believed were most impacting communities were: changes in rain patterns, deforestation, crop failure, especially in relation to climate change, and soil degradation. Concerns about fewer trees were linked to



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beliefs that forests helped regulate or stabilize rain patterns, and soil degradation was seen as a primary reason for crop failure. Community members unanimously agreed that population had increased and land for farming had decreased. Hunger and loss of income was described as a consequence of several of these changes.

Respondents also highlighted changes such as the increased presence of nongovernmental organizations (including Project Concern International/Njira) and development initiatives like village banking and education on health and agriculture, higher prices for fertilizers, and lower prices for crops.

Table 1. Perceived changes in the environment and community

Changes in rain patterns/drought	<i>"For the past 2 years, we have had erratic rainfall. It stops in the middle while the maize has just started producing cobs. Sometimes it stops when we have just applied fertilizer and the fertilizer becomes ineffective. These all are leading to hunger."</i>	SSI with VCPC, Balaka
Deforestation	<i>"Because of the rainfall problems we are also having no trees in our homesteads and lack of trees is also causing erratic rainfall."</i>	FGD with WE Group, Machinga
Crop failure/climate change	<i>"This climate change that's happening is bringing about hunger because when we plant maize, it doesn't do well because of too much heat from the sun. So what's happening here is climate change."</i>	FGD with Water Point Committee/producer group members, Machinga
Soil degradation	<i>"There is degradation of soil nutrients from the soils compared to past years. Parents were able to plant maize without applying fertilizers but now if you plant maize and do not apply fertilizers then you won't achieve anything. And the soil is very hard nowadays compared to the past years the soils were soft, for example, people were going to the hills to pluck mushrooms but now even children don't know mushrooms, and where they grow. And all these are caused by increase in population and soil degradation."</i>	FGD with WE group members, Machinga
Land shortages	<i>"To comment on the land for growing crops, most people do not have enough land for growing crops, and for most people to grow the crops they have to rent the gardens somewhere. And for those who don't have money to use, they cannot rent. And also the other thing is that the land itself for growing crops is scarce, and people don't have a place to grow crops."</i>	FGD with WE group members, Machinga
Population growth	<i>"It [population] is getting bigger and bigger, the population is high nowadays. From what we were told by our parents, maybe the [population] numbers has gone up with 80%, in the past, a village would contain 10% of the people that it is having now."</i>	FGD with WE group members, Machinga
Reduced income	<i>"In the past people were able to find money through many things, we were growing tobacco and sell it and it was a source of income. And to mention of food items, we were harvesting them in abundance but as of now there is no tobacco for sale. And even when you harvest some, the market is not good and in the end there is no money in the homes. And for the food items, we don't harvest enough even to eat, so there is no surplus for us to sell, hence low incomes in the families. When you go to auction with tobacco, you don't sell much and for peas too it is the same. And when you look at cost of maize bag it is MK 12,000 and you wonder where you will get the money to buy one bag."</i>	FGD with WE group members, Machinga
Increase in development activities	<i>"In the past there were no organizations and people didn't know a lot of things, and today they know what to do. Some of these organizations are talking about hygiene, family planning and now all the people are enlightened on what to do."</i>	FGD with WE group members, Machinga

In this study, we examined the perceived role of population growth and FP on the various food security and health-related challenges communities in Balaka and Machinga districts are facing.

Perceived consequences of population growth. Community members believed that population growth was contributing to many of the challenges they were facing. Table 2 highlights the main perceived consequences of population growth respondents described. Community members perceive these consequences to be interconnected. Figure 1 illustrates the various linkages

respondents made when discussing population growth and the changes communities are facing. Several respondents believed water shortages, deforestation, and land shortages are a direct result of population growth. While respondents generally discussed water shortages in terms of increasing amounts of time spent at borewells (which sometimes results in marital conflict), a few discussed how water shortages exacerbate diarrheal diseases and contribute to poor hygiene. Several community members explained how many families face food shortages, and often hunger, as a result of land shortages and crop failure. Land

Table 2. Perceived consequences of population growth

Water shortages	<p><i>“The population growth is what’s causing the difficulties in access to water. Like where we come from, the whole village has one borehole. As for the trees, people are cutting them to sell and get food.”</i></p> <p>FGD with Water Point Committees/Producer Groups, Balaka</p>
Deforestation	<p><i>“This [population growth] has affected us in terms of trees as I said already, the trees are cut down to be used by this growing population.”</i></p> <p>SSI with VCPC member, Machinga</p>
Land shortages	<p><i>“In the past, one would cultivate maybe 5 acres and even without any limit, but with how we have reproduced, it’s difficult for a person to get the farming land as we used to before.”</i></p> <p>FGD with Water Point Committees/Producer groups, Balaka</p>
Hunger	<p><i>“This population growth is bringing about hunger because if you have less land, the end result is that you will have fewer harvests and for a family of say 10 people, and you harvest 3 bags, there will be hunger.”</i></p> <p>SSI with VCPC member, Balaka</p>
Economic/ financial problems	<p><i>“The financial problem is increasing because there used to be few people before, but now the human population has increased.”</i></p> <p>INTERVIEWER: SO HOW DO YOU THINK THE INCREASED POPULATION HAS AFFECTED THE FINANCES OF PEOPLE?</p> <p><i>“Finances are a problem around here because we depend on farming. When we sell our crops, we used to help our children in school, but now when we plant, there is not enough rainfall and we can’t make money for our children.”</i></p> <p>FGD with fathers, Balaka</p>
Health problems/ Drug shortages	<p><i>“Because of population growth, diseases become frequent and even deaths.”</i></p> <p>SSI with VCPC member, Machinga</p> <p><i>“Even getting drugs from the hospitals is difficult because we are many.”</i></p> <p>FGD with Water Point Committees/ Producer Groups, Machinga</p>
Reduced livestock	<p><i>“Some of the animals that we are now keeping are like chickens and pigeons. The feed for these can at least be found from our homes unlike keeping cattle or goats. This is all because of population growth which is causing land to be scarce.”</i></p> <p>FGD with Water Point Committees/ Producer Groups, Balaka</p>

shortages and crop failure were also described as impacting livelihoods and contributing to poverty because farmers are unable to harvest enough to sell, and face low market prices for their produce. The health consequences of population growth were discussed less frequently, and were mainly focused on drug shortages and increased risk of diarrheal diseases, because of water shortages.

Perceived factors contributing to population growth. Community members, especially women, expressed concerns that hunger and poverty in turn contribute to population growth through early childbearing and unstable or multiple marriages. As exemplified in the excerpt from an FGD with WE group members in Machinga in the box, respondents expressed concerns about men abandoning families when they were unable to support them, resulting in additional pressure on women to single-handedly raise their children. Some respondents attributed population growth to lack of FP use. For example, a WE group member in Balaka stated, *“But the main cause of these problems is of high population because of not using FP methods, in the past during the time of our mothers, young women were taking long time before start giving birth to children may be up to 30 years, but this days young women starts giving birth when they are very small, when reaching 30 years some of them have grandchildren. this leads to a lack of land for everyone.”*

In one FGD with WE members, respondents believed that the cash incentives being provided to women for hospital deliveries are encouraging women to have more children.

Demand for FP, child spacing, and smaller family size. FP, child spacing, and a shifting preference for smaller family size were described by community members as a coping strategy to manage the challenges they are facing, such as overpopulation, land shortages, poverty, and hunger. Although not directly asked about climate change or population growth, several respondents across data sources described climate change, food insecurity, and hunger as reasons to have smaller families; having four children was considered an ideal family size by a majority of the respondents. Respondents described how a large family would negatively impact the ability of couples to adequately feed and clothe their children, pay school fees, and save money. They expressed a preference for spacing children five years apart as that would result in the older child being in school by the time the

INTERVIEWER: HOW HAS THE LIFE IN THE FAMILIES OF PEOPLE IN THIS AREA CHANGED IN CONNECTION WITH THE CHANGES THAT WE HAVE DISCUSSED?

Participant 1: “This has affected the families because families are not stable, men are running from hunger.”

WHAT ARE THEY RUNNING FROM?

Participant 1 “They are running from hunger, if they see that there is hunger in the family, they go polygamous because they are running away from hunger from the first house.”

Participant 2: “Parents were saying that modern families are different from past families, even when the families get into this problem of hunger, but in the past men were able to stay together with the family. But nowadays, young men when they just see a little problem in the house, they will run away to marry another woman. That is why when they see that there’s hunger they run to marry another wife and they argue that they will marry in the family where there is no hunger. And this is the major problem in the area.”

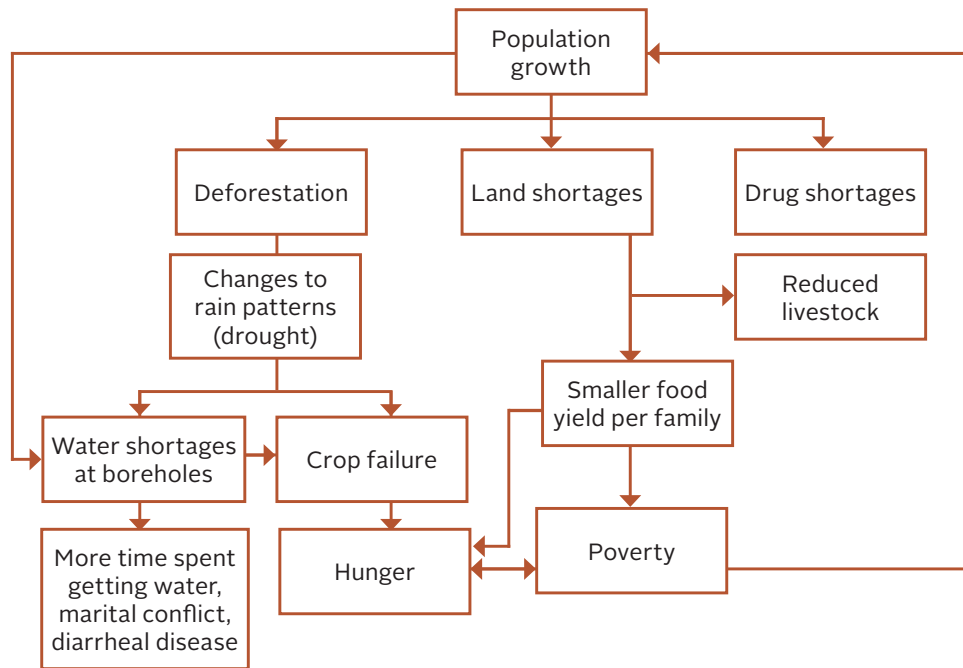
Participant 3: “As [participant] said, hunger has contributed to young girls getting pregnant because they would like to find food because their father has gone to marry another woman and now leaves the responsibility to the mother of which she cannot accomplish it. In the end men take advantage of the young girls of that family. Or else the men will give her maize to eat at home and will need a favor in terms of sex in the end the girl might get pregnant.”

FGD with WE Group Members, Machinga

next child was born, and so the parents wouldn’t be overburdened and would have free time for productive, income generating work (see [Brief 2](#) for additional perceived benefits of family planning, child spacing, and smaller family size that emerged across data sources).

Community members also discussed a range of other coping strategies being promoted by NGOs to manage the various environmental and other challenges they are facing within their communities that are not the focus of this brief, including: reforestation; sanitation and hygiene; modern farming practices such as mulching and building ridges; village banking; shifting from rearing cattle and goats to rabbits and poultry production; and seeking alternate livelihoods, including migration.

Figure 1. Perceived linkages between population growth and changes in the environment and community



"I think the first thing we can do [to cope with the changes] is irrigation farming and the second one is reducing the number of children we can have so that the little we can get can be enough for all of us. If we can harvest 10 bags of maize, it's possible that we can eat that till another harvesting season without having to buy. So if we can have few children, do irrigation and plant fast maturing crops, we can be helped to deal with these droughts."

FGD with members of WE group, Machinga

"In the past, people believed that when a woman gets married, her duty was to produce as many children as possible especially here in the villages. That is why people would have as many as 8 to 10 children but they never struggled to provide for the children. In recent times, everything has changed because there is no enough land for farming, people are lacking food. That is why in recent times people are advocating for family planning to control population growth."

SSI with youth CBDA, Machinga

"Participant 6: I want to comment, in this community these days, it's not exciting to have 10 or 15 children because of how things have changed. The climate has so changed so we need to have 4 children going downwards. And with how things have been this year, can you manage 6 children? It's a problem. So a good number is 4 or 3."

SO YOU TALKED ABOUT CLIMATE. WHAT HAS HAPPENED WITH CLIMATE IN THIS COMMUNITY?

"Participant 6: we have had erratic rainfall and we have droughts unlike in the past years. Plus we have a small land to farm because the population has increased so it's difficult for one to have say, 2 acres. Its 1 or ½ acre that's available so this ½ acre isn't enough for 6 children and 2 parents like 8 people."

FGD with fathers, Machinga

Conclusions and Program Recommendations

The formative research study findings discussed in this brief provide important insights into the broader environmental context of FP use in Malawi's Balaka and Machinga districts. Community members unanimously agreed that population had increased in recent times and perceived population growth as a contributor to environmental changes they are experiencing, like deforestation and land, food, and water shortages. Conversely, some believed environmental changes caused hunger and poverty, which in turn contributed to population growth through early childbearing and unstable or multiple marriages. There was wide recognition of the challenges associated with providing for large families and/or closely spaced children (food, clothes, and schooling) given climate changes and land shortages. The broader food insecurity, hunger, and financial constraints these communities are facing is an important factor that influences the demand for FP, child spacing, and smaller family size. In order to promote broader normative change and enhanced social acceptability for FP, the recommendations for consideration by Njira and other FP programs are as follows:

- Leverage both health and non-health activity platforms to raise awareness of the synergies between population growth, FP, health, and food security.
 - Position the benefits of modern contraceptive use within the broader environmental, economic, and social contexts of people's lives and as an integral part of climate adaptation and household resiliency strategies.
- Provide group engagement opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue around:
 - Strategies to keep girls in school to prevent early marriage, transactional sex, and unintended pregnancy.
 - Strategies to support young people in delaying first birth until they are physically mature, financially independent, and emotionally ready to have children.

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