

COVID-19 in Rural Malawi: Perceived Risks and Economic Impacts

Kate Ambler, Sylvan Herskowitz, Mywish Maredia, and Jonathan Mockshell

Malawi reported its first case of COVID-19 in April and declared a national emergency. Schools, bars and restaurants were closed, international flights suspended, and the economy faced considerable disruptions: quarterly growth projections from July were cut by more than 60% (Saldarriaga Noel et al. 2020). While still concerning, compared to other countries and other parts of the world, the spread of this disease in Malawi has been relatively modest with 5,951 confirmed cases and 184 COVID-19 linked deaths as of November 8, 2020. After accelerating rates of infection in June and July, the rates have decreased over the last two months.¹ In response, there has been a partial return to normalcy, marked by easing COVID-19 restrictions and the reopening of schools at the beginning of September, even while the future trajectory of the disease remains unknown.

COVID-19's impact on the ground and in peoples' daily lives remains an area of considerable uncertainty. This may be especially true in rural areas where information is less readily available. Because poverty is disproportionately concentrated in rural areas, this population is vulnerable to the negative impacts of COVID-19. This is true despite the fact that negative effects are larger overall in urban areas due to higher population densities and daily activities that are more likely to be impacted by any coronavirus restrictions, and the fact that the disease itself has been more heavily concentrated in urban areas.

This brief discusses perceptions of COVID-19 impacts and risks in a sample of 1,020 households in eight districts in rural Malawi conducted in August 2020. The study is ongoing and follow-up interviews will be conducted with respondents every three months for the next year. The original aim of the study is to understand seasonality of rural labor activities; however, after the onset of the pandemic, a number of COVID-19-related questions were incorporated into the survey to assess perceptions and experiences in rural Malawi.

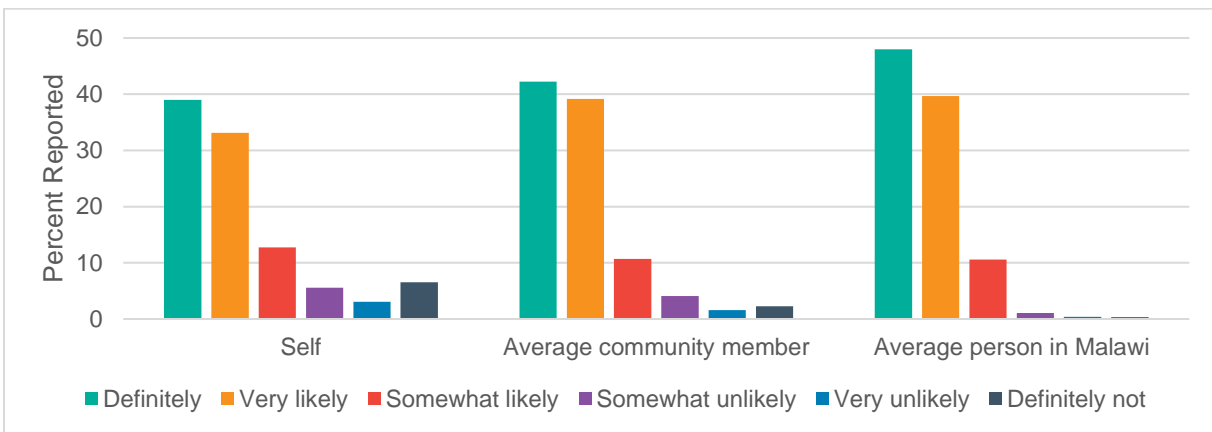
¹ <https://www.who.int/countries/mwi/> (Date accessed: October 4, 2020)

Awareness and Concern About COVID-19

Awareness of COVID-19 among respondents was near universal with 99.3% reporting to have heard of the disease. Respondents were then asked to rate the likelihood of someone in their country, in their community, and themselves getting infected. Responses were recorded on a scale ranging from “definite infection” to “definite avoidance of infection.”² Seventy percent felt that their risk of contracting the disease was either very likely or definite.

As shown in Figure 1, respondents saw the risk of exposure as slightly higher for other members of their community and slightly higher still for other Malawians outside of their community, relative to their own, personal, risk of infection. Given the current low infection rates of COVID-19 in Malawi, respondents are either overestimating the probability that they will become infected or anticipating that the pandemic will worsen. Respondents were also asked how they felt the disease would affect them if they became infected. Responses reflect that respondents take the disease seriously, with 75% saying that symptoms would be severe (or worse) and 46% reporting that they expected infection to lead to either debilitation or death.

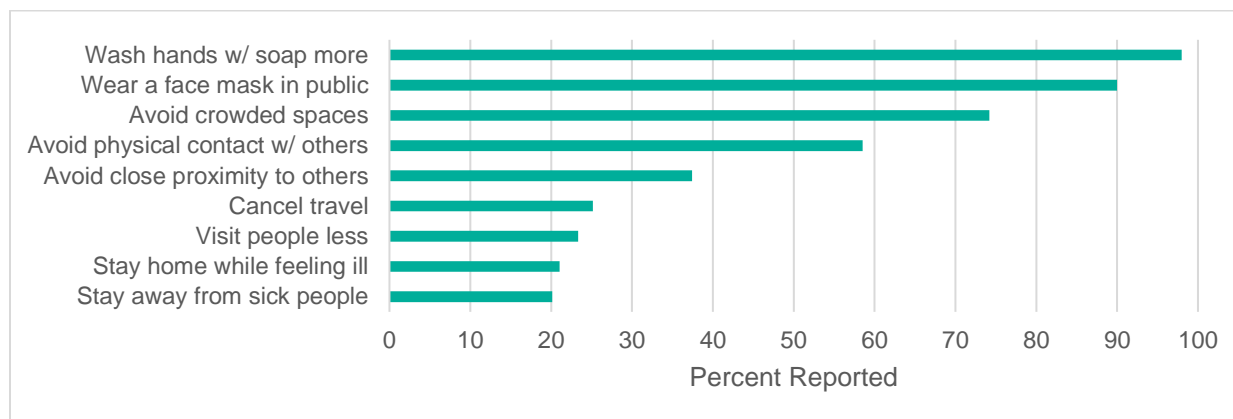
Figure 1: Perceived Likelihood of Infection



When asked to list actions that could be taken to reduce transmissions and exposure to the disease (without prompting of responses), the top answers provided were frequent hand washing with soap and wearing face masks in public, both cited by over 90% of respondents (Figure 2). Relatively less frequently cited actions included canceling travel, visiting people less, staying home when ill, and avoiding sick people. Interestingly, LSMS phone surveys conducted by the World Bank in late May and early June reported much lower awareness of mask wearing (Chikoti et al. 2020a) although an update based on data from August suggests, similar to our findings, that awareness of hand washing and mask wearing is nearly universal with over 90% of respondents stating that they “intend” to partially or fully comply with government directives on these behaviors (Chikoti et al. 2020b).

² The options were: Definitely, very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely, and definitely not.

Figure 2: Unprompted, Reported Awareness of Actions for Reduced Exposure



These responses suggest that messaging about the seriousness of the pandemic has been effective in rural parts of Malawi. Although people may be overestimating the likelihood of infection, they are also correctly reporting knowledge of a wide range of effective measures to limit the spread of the disease. Future survey rounds will continue to track these perceptions, allowing for ongoing comparison with rates of infection. Policymakers should be cognizant of this gap between actual exposure and perceptions.

Economic Impacts and Productive Activities

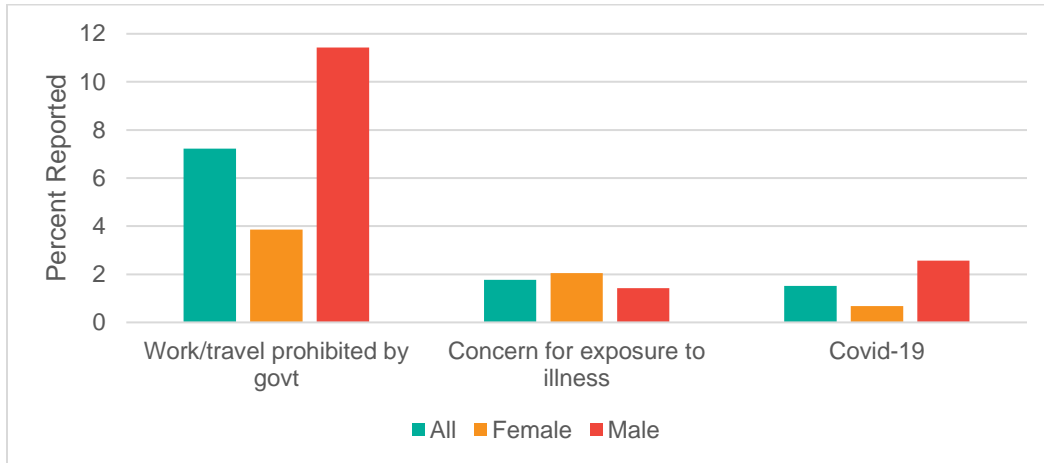
In rural areas, incidence of COVID-19 is very low, suggesting that the direct health impacts of the disease are unlikely to be high. But disruptions resulting from national policies as well as peoples' behaviors could still drive meaningful economic responses. The current data does not allow for analysis of the causal impacts of the pandemic, but we can describe how respondents perceive that impact, and unusual challenges they have recently faced.

In our study, 56% of respondents said that food products they usually buy were not available to them in nearby markets. Almost 50% of respondents reported that food prices for some of their regular purchases had increased recently. And 50% reported limiting the size of their meals while 45% reported having reduced the number of meals over the last week, suggestive of a high level of vulnerability.³

Reported levels of labor participation were low with just 65% of men and 52% of women having worked over the previous three months: a likely reflection of the timing of the survey in a low agricultural season. When asked why they had not been working, the most cited responses do not appear linked to COVID-19: other household responsibilities (31%), physical or mental inability (13%), unavailability of work (12%), retirement (12%), or health issues (12%). Three less-frequently cited reasons could plausibly be linked to the pandemic: work and travel prohibited by government (7%), concern for exposure to illness (1.8%), and COVID-19 itself (1.7%). Attribution to government-imposed restrictions was more frequently cited for men (11%) than for women in the sample (4%), a difference likely attributable to the different types of work done by men and women in rural areas of Malawi, shown in Figure 3.

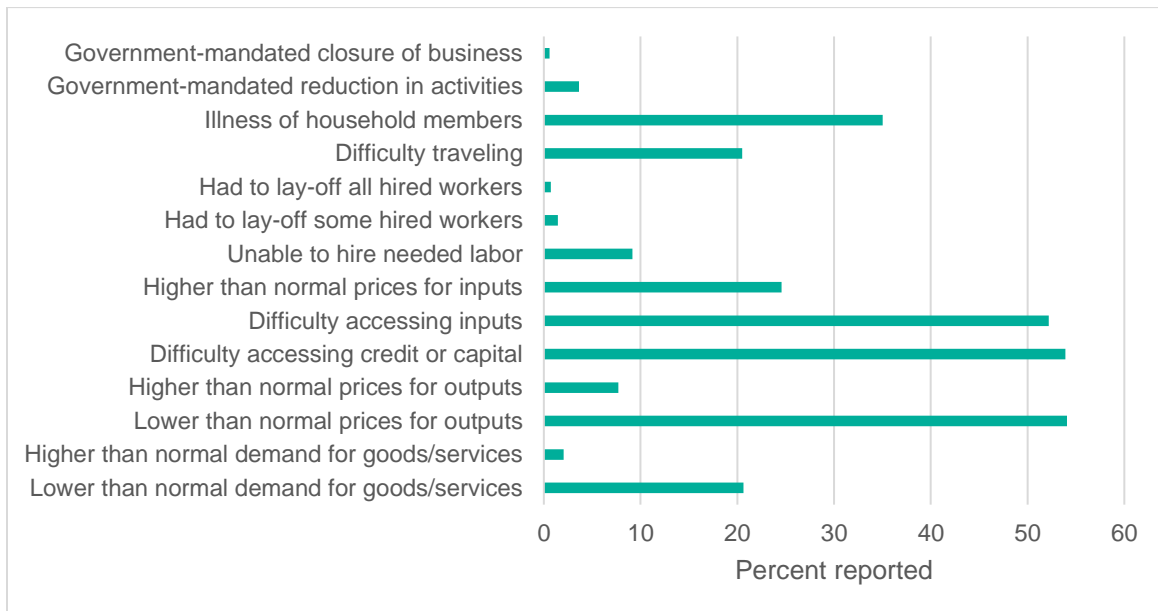
³ See "Malawi Household Food Security Bulletin" for more detailed analysis of the relationship between COVID-19 and food security in Malawi.

Figure 3: COVID-19 Related Reasons for Not Working



The survey also collected information specifically about unusual challenges facing household farms and businesses in the last three months, shown in Figure 4. Among households engaged in farming or who had a household business activity (67% of households in our sample) more than 50% of respondents reported lower than normal prices for outputs, difficulty accessing credit, and difficulty accessing inputs. Other significant reported challenges include lower than normal demand for outputs, higher than normal prices for inputs, and difficulty traveling. While this is useful information, the COVID-19 pandemic is only one possible reason for these challenges. In particular, output prices may have been lower because of good harvests across the country. Illness of household members is also mentioned, but given low incidence of the disease, this is unlikely to be related to COVID-19.

Figure 4: Unusual challenges facing farm or business

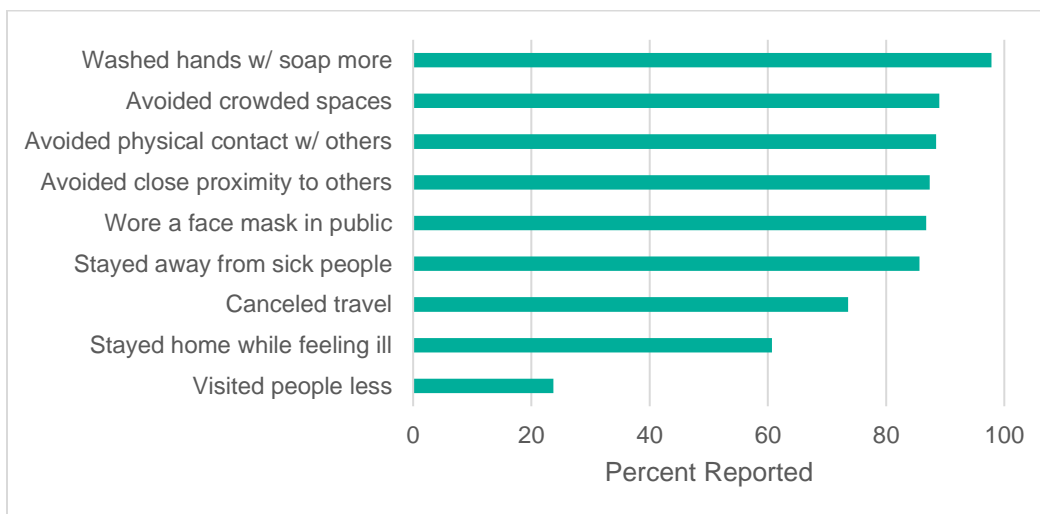


With future rounds of data collection, we will be able to examine how these indicators evolve over time for this population.

Mitigating Actions Taken

The survey also asked respondents about whether or not they had taken certain actions in the last seven days. Though these are all actions known to reduce transmission of COVID-19, the disease was not specifically mentioned at this point in the survey. Respondents claim to be taking a wide range of actions as summarized in Figure 5. Notably, willingness to reduce travel, remaining home while sick, and especially visiting others less frequently were the least frequently cited behavioral responses with reduction of local visits cited by under 24% of respondents. Interestingly, wearing face masks was mentioned by almost 90% of respondents, which compares to data collected in Round 2 of the World Bank LSMS survey in July, in which 61% of respondents report that they “never” wore a face mask in the last week (World Bank 2020). The World Bank’s more recent update suggests that reported wearing of face masks has gone up considerably with 72% wearing them most or all of the time. In both our own analysis as well as that from the World Bank, it is difficult to know whether reported behaviors reflect what respondents know they *should* be doing as opposed to what they know they are *supposed* to be doing. With local anecdotes suggesting compliance significantly below the level of our estimates, on the ground validation of these responses could help to better fill this information gap.

Figure 5: Reported Actions Taken to Reduce Exposure



Conclusion

Public health messaging and policies appear to have been effective in raising awareness of COVID-19 in rural Malawi. People know it exists, are taking it seriously, are aware of preventative measures, and report that they are taking actions that reduce exposure and transmission. With the future spread of COVID-19 uncertain, government messaging should continue to be used to communicate important public health information in an evolving and unpredictable environment to ensure that spread of the disease continues to be low. However, given that survey respondents are over-estimating the current risk of COVID-19 infection, the government should closely track citizen perceptions to ensure that messaging corresponds with current risk levels in the country.

Impacts of the disease on labor outcomes and food security are difficult to assess at this stage, although food insecurity and increasing prices were commonly reported. Independent of concerns regarding COVID-19, government should continue to take steps to promote food availability and a steady flow of agricultural inputs in rural areas.

In this data, a small but meaningful share of respondents indicated that government restrictions on work and movement were the principal reason they were not working. Future restrictions may be considered if the virus begins to spread more rapidly. However, the potential for disruptions to peoples' livelihoods and appropriate social protection response will continue to be an important consideration in the Malawian context. The evolution of the disease in Malawi is still uncertain and continued monitoring of perceptions and impacts of the disease in rural areas will be important for making sure that there are real time insights to guide evidence-based policymaking and designing social protection packages.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kate Ambler and Sylvan Herskowitz are Research Fellows with IFPRI's Markets, Trade and Institutions Division (MTID). Mywish Maredia is Professor of International Development in the Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics at Michigan State University. Jonathan Mockshell is a Research Scientist - Agricultural Economist in the Decision and Policy Analysis Research Area at CIAT.

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