

# CFSC RURAL BASIC-NEEDS-BASKET PROJECT: MASEYA (CHIKWAWA) AND KANYENDA (NKHOTAKOTA)

## 1. Introduction

The Social Conditions Research Programme of the Centre for Social Concern (CfSC) conducts quarterly data collection to assess the cost of living and welfare of Malawian households. The data focuses on food prices, non-food costs, calorie intake, household income, and coping mechanisms. This comparative analysis of April and June 2025 provide evidence of how external shocks such as floods, inflation, and market forces continue to impact household survival in **Chikwawa (TA Maseya)** and **Nkhotakota (TA Kanyenda)**.

These findings are crucial for informing policy interventions, donor priorities, and advocacy work on poverty and economic governance in Malawi.

## 2. Cost of Ideal Food Items

### *Narrative Analysis*

- Food remains the largest component of household expenditure.
- In Chikwawa, the cost of food for a family of six rose from MK223, 455 in April to MK263, 955 in June (an 18% increase).
- In Nkhotakota, food costs rose only slightly by 1% (MK276, 345 to MK279, 345).
- The doubling of maize prices in Chikwawa was the biggest driver of food inflation; further straining households that already depend heavily on maize.
- Protein sources (beans, goat meat, eggs) remained expensive, undermining balance diet intake.

**Table 1: Cost of Ideal Food Basket (Family of Six)**

District	April 2025 (MK)	June 2025 (MK)	Change (MK)	% Change
Chikwawa	223,455	263,955	+40,500	+18%
Nkhotakota	276,345	279,345	+3,000	+1%

## 3. Cost of Ideal Non-Food Items

### *Narrative Analysis*

- Non-food essentials such as soap, charcoal, airtime, and basic body care are indispensable for household survival.
- In Chikwawa, costs rose sharply by 36% (MK94, 900 → MK129, 000), while in Nkhotakota, the increase was 19% (MK93, 400 → MK111, 400).

- Charcoal prices were the main driver in both districts, reflecting energy poverty and deforestation pressures.

**Table 2: Cost of Ideal Non-Food Basket**

District	April 2025 (MK)	June 2025 (MK)	Change (MK)	% Change
Chikwawa	94,900	129,000	+34,100	+36%
Nkhotakota	93,400	111,400	+18,000	+19%

#### **4. Average Household Incomes**

##### *Narrative Analysis*

- Encouragingly, household incomes increased significantly in both districts.
- Chikwawa:** MK71, 458 in April → MK161, 200 in June (+126%).
- Nkhotakota:** MK31, 400 in April → MK182, 013 in June (+480%).
- Main income drivers were casual labour, usury (money lending), salaries/wages, and crop sales.
- However, despite increases, incomes remain unstable, seasonal, and vulnerable to shocks.

**Table 3: Average Household Incomes**

District	April 2025 (MK)	June 2025 (MK)	Change (MK)	% Change
Chikwawa	71,458	161,200	+89,742	+126%
Nkhotakota	31,400	182,013	+150,613	+480%

#### **5. Kilo Calorie Intake**

##### *Narrative Analysis*

- The recommended minimum caloric intake per person per day is 2,100 kcal.
- Nkhotakota (TA Kanyenda):** calorie intake improved significantly (1306 → 1939 kcal), though still below the minimum.
- Chikwawa (TA Maseya):** intake declined (1220 → 1178 kcal), showing worsening food insecurity.
- Challenges in Chikwawa include flood-damaged farmland, sand deposits along the Shire River, and large tracts of land converted to sugarcane plantations.

**Table 4: Calorie Intake per Person per Day**

District (TA)	April 2025 (kcal)	June 2025 (kcal)	Change
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District (TA)	April 2025 (kcal)	June 2025 (kcal)	Change
Kanyenda (Nkhotakota)	1,306	1,939	+633
Maseya (Chikwawa)	1,220	1,178	-42

## 6. Cost of Living (Food + Non-Food + School Expenses)

### *Narrative Analysis*

- The cost of living reflects the combined cost of food, non-food items, and average school expenses (MK26, 000).
- Nkhotakota (TA Kanyenda):** Cost rose by 5% (MK395, 745 → MK416, 745).
- Chikwawa (TA Maseya):** Cost rose by 22% (MK344, 355 → MK418, 955).
- Despite higher incomes, many households remain unable to meet basic needs due to steep cost escalations.

**Table 5: Monthly Cost of Living**

District (TA)	April 2025 (MK)	June 2025 (MK)	Change (MK)	% Change
Kanyenda (Nkhotakota)	395,745	416,745	+21,000	+5%
Maseya (Chikwawa)	344,355	418,955	+74,600	+22%

## 7. Coping Mechanisms

### *Narrative Analysis*

Households unable to cover basic needs resorted to negative coping strategies.

- Chikwawa:** high reliance on casual labour, reducing meals, and skipping entire days without food.
- Nkhotakota:** more severe strategies emerged, including selling household assets, cooking seed grain, cutting down trees, and even family breakdowns.
- These strategies undermine future resilience, children's education, and environmental sustainability.

**Table 6: Coping Mechanisms Adopted by Households (%)**

Coping Mechanism	Chikwawa April	Chikwawa June	Nkhotakota April	Nkhotakota June
Working in others' fields	60	48	38	80
Selling household assets	5	15	0	13
Cooking grain meant for	0	5	0	15

Coping Mechanism	Chikwawa April	Chikwawa June	Nkhotakota April	Nkhotakota June
seed				
Reducing portions per meal	43	40	13	48
Reducing meals per day	10	43	8	40
Skipping entire day without eating	45	48	8	48
Adults reducing food for children	25	40	10	48
Using cheaper/less preferred food	0	8	0	3
Cutting fruit trees for firewood	0	0	3	15
Gathering unusual wild foods	0	0	0	5
Cutting trees for charcoal	0	5	3	23
School children staying home	3	3	3	13
Marriage breakdowns	0	0	8	15
Abandoning land to work as tenants	13	13	0	0

## 8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This comparative study highlights both progress and deepening vulnerabilities:

- **Food Security:** Chikwawa remains in crisis, with declining calorie intake and higher food price inflation.
- **Household Incomes:** While incomes have risen, much of the increase is absorbed by rising living costs.
- **Negative Coping:** Households are undermining their long-term survival through asset sales, child neglect in schooling, and environmental degradation.

### Policy Recommendations:

1. **Expand adaptive safety nets** (cash transfers, subsidized inputs).
2. **Invest in climate-resilient agriculture** in flood-prone areas like Chikwawa.
3. **Promote renewable energy alternatives** to reduce charcoal dependency.
4. **Support income diversification** (beyond casual labour and usury).
5. **Prioritize nutrition interventions** to raise calorie intake above survival thresholds.

## RISING COSTS AND DECLINING CALORIE INTAKE PUSH HOUSEHOLDS INTO NEGATIVE COPING STRATEGIES – CFSC REPORT (APRIL–JUNE 2025)

The Centre for Social Concern (CfSC) has released findings from its April–June 2025 Cost of Living and Welfare Monitoring Report, revealing that households in Chikwawa and Nkhotakota are struggling with rising living costs, unstable food security, and harmful coping mechanisms despite increases in household incomes.

### Key Findings:

#### 1. Soaring Living Costs

- In **Chikwawa (TA Maseya)**, the cost of living rose by **22%** from MK344, 355 in April to MK418, 955 in June. This happened at this period when people have just harvested and therefore should have enough food at home.
- In **Nkhotakota (TA Kanyenda)**, the cost rose by **5%**, reaching MK416, 745 in June.
- The sharpest increases came from **food inflation (18% in Chikwawa)** and **charcoal prices** which doubled in some areas. The Chikwawa situation is due to floods and drought which meant that they had crop failure.

#### 2. Household Incomes Rising but Uneven

- Average household income in **Chikwawa** more than doubled (MK71, 458 → MK161, 200).
- In **Nkhotakota**, income increased nearly six-fold (MK31, 400 → MK182, 013).
- This increase in household income is due to the harvest period.
- However, much of these earnings are being consumed by higher food and energy costs, leaving little room for savings or resilience.

#### 3. Calorie Intake Below Survival Thresholds

- In **Nkhotakota (Kanyenda)**, calorie intake improved from **1,306 to 1,939 kcal per person per day**, but remains below the recommended **2,100 kcal minimum**.
- In **Chikwawa (Maseya)**, intake **declined further from 1,220 to 1,178 kcal**, signaling worsening food insecurity due to flooding, sand deposits, and loss of farmland to sugarcane plantations.
- If this is the case this season, we can imagine what will happen in the lean season.

#### 4. Worsening Coping Strategies

Households are increasingly forced to adopt negative and unsustainable survival strategies:

- In **Chikwawa**, 48% of households reported **skipping entire days without eating**, and 40% reported **reducing adult consumption to feed children**.
- In **Nkhotakota**, households resorted to **cooking seed grain (15%)**, **cutting down trees for firewood and charcoal (23%)**, and even **family breakdowns (15%)** as economic stress deepened.
- Such strategies undermine **long-term resilience, children's education, and environmental sustainability**.

### CfSC Call to Action:

The CfSC calls for urgent interventions to safeguard household welfare:

- Strengthening **adaptive safety nets** such as cash transfers and subsidized inputs.
- Expanding **climate-resilient agriculture** to protect food security in flood-prone areas.
- Promoting **sustainable energy alternatives** to reduce charcoal dependence and deforestation.
- Supporting **diversified livelihoods** beyond casual labour and usury.
- Prioritizing **nutrition programs** to lift households above minimum dietary requirements.

The findings show that while incomes have risen, they are not translating into better nutrition or improved resilience. Families are being pushed into desperate measures that compromise both their health and their future. Urgent policy responses are needed,” said the CfSC.