The Centre for Social Concern

Rural Basic Needs Basket Project (assessing the cost of living and service delivery situations in rural areas)

Rural Basic Needs Basket (RBNB) is a project under the Social Conditions Research Programme. RBNB depicts various facets of the rural household situation such as food security and consumption patterns. It also depicts the cost of non-food items such as washing/bathing soap, matches, and paraffin etc. and also access to social amenities such as markets, roads, education, and health.

The project collects monthly data on household food consumption and quarterly social service access by communities. Food composition tables are used to calculate amount of calories (energy) consumed by individual households members in a month. This figure is compared with the recommended calories, which are supposed to be consumed per person per day. An individual can be either below or above the recommended value depending on how much food is consumed and its quality. Households, which are food insecure, consume less calories than those which are food secure.

It also looks at how much access do communities have to socio-economic services such as health services, markets, roads, education and others as these have a bearing on improving the socio-economic status of rural communities. The gaps in food and nutrition security and socio-economic services are highlighted and shared with the government and other stakeholders for action through advocacy work.

So in short RBNB is the tool the CFSC is using for assessing the living conditions of the people in the rural areas to raise the profile of rural areas. This information is intended to be shared with stakeholders at community, district and at national level. Upon finding the gaps in the food situation at household level and service delivery at community level, the government and potential organizations that have a poverty reduction orientation (e.g. those who operate in one of the targeted areas) will be enabled to better support the rural communities with their service delivery projects. We also foresee that organizations who are involved in food security projects or Community Based Disaster Preparedness like CADECOM will themselves learn how to use or contract the centre to role out RBNB surveys in for them significant areas, as an important tool to monitor their interventions. It can also be used to monitor certain new interventions in some areas such as the growing of Jatropha.

Because it is important that all stakeholders of rural development, especially the government as a duty bearer be held accountable to the promise of bringing development to the rural areas, the RBNB will be used to advocate for and lobby government for policy changes.

The project has targeted some relevant policies as follows:

**Food and Nutrition Security Policy**

The policy looks at the following issues:

- a) Nutritional status
- b) Production
- c) Consumption
d) Stability  
e) Crosscutting issues  

A good *nutrition status* results into healthy people who can participate actively in the national development. Human development will be achieved at household level as they will fully participate in taking charge of their lives and their own development. Our experience through the project has been that the majority do not consume enough food and this results in low calorie intake and leads to food insecurity. This is mostly detrimental to little children who, at their age, need more nutritious food for their fast growing bodies. It leads to stunted growth. This results in poor performance in class. This affects their future economic productivity. Therefore, advocating for food security interventions, which will improve nutrition status at household level, will be vital to correct the current situation on the ground.

One of the factors that indirectly affect the level of calorie intake in the households is the issue of *production*. We have nutrition insecurity due to low calorie intake. This low calorie intake is brought about by low crop production. There are a number of factors that affect the level of production at household and community level. Some of these are:

a) Small land holdings  
b) Mono cropping  
c) Low soil fertility  
d) Dependence on rainfed agriculture  
e) Limited access to agricultural inputs  
f) Limited access to credit  
g) Price band

It is common that a number of households, including our target households, in rural areas do not have enough land dedicated to commercial and subsistence farming. With improved technologies, enough food can be achieved from these small lands provided they are put into use properly. The majority of small producers do not utilize these technologies due inadequate knowledge. It is the responsibility of the centre and other partners to advocate for those interventions, which will lead to increased adoption of these technologies by small producers. One example is soil fertility improvement technologies and small scale irrigation. With the above technologies minus access to agricultural inputs, household food security will never be achieved. The majority of rural households do have limited access agricultural inputs be it on cash basis or on credit basis. Small producers’ economic base is weak, in that they do not have enough cash to feed themselves and to purchase agricultural input at the same time. Credit institutions are either few or are not available. It is the responsibility of the centre and other partners to advocate for small businesses in the rural areas and also role out of micro finance institutions to rural areas, which will eventually help small producers be economically stable. This will even help improve their household food *consumption*. Due to declining income levels at household level, consumption of food at appropriate levels (dietary patterns) is affected due to the weak purchasing power of individual households. This is brought about by low diversification of food crops grown. More awareness needs to be raised to enable small producers to accept that food can not only come from maize only. Maize can also be supplemented/and or substituted by other food crops such as sweet potatoes, cassava, irish potatoes etc… This diversification will help to increase the number of months households have food.
Another way is to advocate for food processing technology, which will help to store perishable crops such as cassava and sweet potatoes for more months. Most small producers are failing to do this due to inadequate awareness and inadequate knowledge.

Small producers will only improve their economic base if prices on the market are competitive. Establishment of good price bands will help to entice small producers into producing more to earn more in turn. The advocacy will dwell on the price band, which should be beneficial to both the producer and the consumer. Food processing contributes to food stability at household level.

Our studies have also revealed the absence or non-functional government produce-buying/selling markets such as Agricultural Development Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) depots, which when stocked with agricultural produce and inputs, will enhance food stability at community level. Small producers have also lamented on the time these markets start buying their produce. They start buying activity too late when they have already sold their produce to unscrupulous vendors due to liberalization of markets. The government will be pressed to revise the time they start buying from farmers.

**Education Policy**

The broad policy of the Malawi government is to reduce poverty. Education is the centre-piece of this policy. Increased investment in education can yield broad economic and social benefits. Evidence shows that education is associated with increased agricultural productivity, higher incomes and lower fertility rates and with improved nutrition and health. The education of parents, especially mothers, has shown to affect the cognitive, affective and physical development of the child. Following the Jomtien declaration on ‘Education For All’ Malawi joined other nations of the world in declaring education a basic human right and has accordingly enshrined this belief in the country’s constitution. In most areas where Rural BNB is working, this human right is compromised. We can’t expect a child attain basic education where the following scenario exist:

- Inadequate and poor class rooms against many pupils
- Inadequate teachers
- High teacher: pupil ratio
- Inadequate and poor teacher houses
- Inadequate and poor quality source of water

The project will advocate for an improved environment, which will eventually improve education standards in the project areas.

**The National Environmental Policy**

This aims at the following:

a) To increase public and political awareness and understanding of the need for sustained environmental protection, conservation and management.
b) To mobilize initiatives and resources in the private sector, NGOS, and CBOs to achieve sustainable environmental management
c) To involve local communities in environmental planning and action at all levels and empower them to protect, conserve and sustainably utilize the nation’s natural resources.

In the study areas there is degradation of the natural resources by the small producers who would like to realize too much from them. This is because of ignorance due to
inadequate knowledge on the importance of protecting natural resources. This is because, country wide, we have either no forestry extension staff or unskilled forestry staff. The centre will advocate for policies, which will eventually help increase the number of skilled personnel in all areas who will bring extension messages to the grass roots. Currently, some communities are using natural forests for charcoal burning without thinking of replenishing them.

**Land Policy**
Land scarcity exists in spite of lands lying idle. A considerable amount of suitable agricultural land remains uncultivated in the rural areas. Encroachment onto private land, forest reserves and national parks has become frequent and sometimes violent in the belief that estates have far too much land for their needs. Corrupt administrative practices are another cause of land shortage for the poor. Fraudulent disposal of customary land by traditional chiefs and government officials often deny critically needed access to people most desperate for land. The above is one of the factors enhancing low productivity at household level due to inadequate land for cultivation. The onus is with the government to distribute some land, which is idle to the landless. This is another area of advocacy. The land tenure system in Malawi does put women on disadvantage although about 70% of smallholder farmers in Malawi are women and the land is one of the production assets.

**The National Transport Policy**

The goal of the policy is to ensure the provision of a coordinated transport environment that fosters a safe and competitive operation of commercially viable, financially sustainable and environmentally friendly transport services. Malawi has been spending heavily on its road network in recent years, and as a result, has achieved better levels of roads quality. During the early 2000s, Malawi was devoting nearly 4% of its GDP to road sector spending, one of the highest ratios in Southern Africa. But the challenge is, road preservation expenditures still falls significantly short of what is needed to preserve the network in good condition. Beyond the trunk network, accessibility falls off. About 26% of Malawi’s population lives within 2km of all weather roads. While this is significantly better than the benchmark for Least Industrialized Countries (LICs), the number is low in absolute terms and remains a concern for a country so heavily reliant on agriculture. Placing the entire rural population of Malawi within 2km of an all-season road would be extremely costly and challenging, since it would require a quadrupling of the classified road network. The CFSC will advocate for a more strategic approach of prioritizing improvements in rural accessibility towards areas of high current or potential agricultural production. The areas where Rural BNB project is working are among them but the conditions of the roads are too bad.

**Agricultural Market Policy**

In Malawi agricultural marketing has been dominated by the Agricultural Development and Market Corporation (ADMARC), a government parastatal. Even though agricultural produce markets were liberalized, ADMARC continues to play a dominant role especially in the remote areas where private traders do not have a presence. Currently, ADMARC operates along side private traders in both input and output markets. However, it still maintains a monopoly given its extensive market
infrastructure as compared to the private traders. The few private traders that are there find it unprofitable to operate in remote areas where ADMARC has closed its markets or markets are but are non-functional in that they do not have required agricultural inputs or they start buying agricultural produce from smallholder farmers too late. This has worsened the market access problems among farmers in the remote but highly productive agricultural areas. Since ADMARC used to provide both inputs (on credit) and acted as a buyer of produce, the closure or non-functioning of existing structures has frustrated most farmers. Farmers in the project area usually complain of unprofitable markets since the majority, who buy from them are vendors/middlemen who offer them unsatisfactory prices. Farmers do not have any choice but to sell to them.

The CFSC will advocate for the improvement of the road infrastructure to entice more private traders to do business in these remote areas and advocating for opening of the closed markets and availability of appropriate agricultural inputs for farmers’ access. It will also continue to advocate for a minimum and maximum price for the staple crop maize to assure reasonable income for the producer and access by the buyer.

The Connection between Urban and Rural BNB

The food, which is consumed by urban dwellers comes from rural areas. Rural farmers are producers while urban dwellers are mostly consumers. With the theory of Demand and Supply, when agricultural commodity supply is low and the demand is high, prices of commodities go up and vice versa. If production of agricultural produce is low in the rural areas due to constraints already discussed above, the commodity will be scarce and coupled with a poor road network, prices of this commodity will be too expensive as it reaches the final consumer. If policies are put in place which are geared to improving this production and improving accessibility to the rural areas through infrastructure development, e.g. roads, the supply will be high and this will eventually push down prices of agricultural commodities. When prices are low, the amount of money which was previously used for buying food will also go down, this will contribute to the reduction of cost of living for urban dwellers.

Study results from Rural BNB will also show rural markets with fair agricultural commodity markets. Urban dwellers in proximity to these markets will be able to follow these markets where they can commodities in bulk for household consumption.

Advocacy Strategies

There are a number of ways which will be used to pass through our advocacy information and these are:

1. Through the radio e.g. ZBS. This will be inform of a press statement.
2. Through the print media
3. During the stakeholder meetings. This is through District Executive Committee (DEC) meetings to which CFSC is a member.
4. Through e-mails to individuals and organizations
5. Through Ministries/departments involved in the services the centre collects data for.
6. Through CFSC website
7. Through CFSC newsletter