

Malawi Social Protection Research Agenda

Evidence priorities for a stronger, more inclusive and shock-responsive social protection system

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Abbreviations

AIP	Agricultural Inputs Programme
COMSIP	Community Savings and Investment Promotion
CS-EPWP	Climate Smart Enhanced Public Works Programme
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSSPN	Civil Society Social Protection Network
CUCI	COVID-19 Urban Cash Intervention
DODMA	Department of Disaster Management Affairs
DPO	Disabled People's Organisation
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
GRM	Grievance Redress Mechanism
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IHS	Integrated Household Survey
KII	Key Informant Interview
LUANAR	Lilongwe University of Agriculture & Natural Resources
MDTF	Multi-Donor Trust Fund
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MIP-1	Malawi 2063 First 10-year Implementation Plan
MNSPS	Malawi National Social Protection Strategy 2023–2028
MNSSP	Malawi National Social Support Programme I (2013-2016) & II (2018-2023)
MOF EP&D	Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Decentralization
MoGCDSW	Malawi Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare
MSPRA	Malawi Social Protection Research Agenda
MSR	Malawi Social Registry MSR
MUST	Malawi University of Science & Tech
MW2063	Malawi Vision 2063
NCST	National Commission for Science and Technology
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLGFC	National Local Government Finance Committee
NPC	National Planning Commission
NRA	National Research Agenda
NSO	National Statistics Office
NSPP	National Social Protection Policy 2024–2029
PRSP	Poverty Reduction and Social Protection (Division of MOF EP&D)
RBM	Reserve Bank of Malawi
SCTP	Social Cash Transfer Programme
SIAM	Spinal Injuries Association of Malawi
SLG	Savings and Loans Group
SP-GEAR	Social Protection for Gender Empowerment and Resilience programme
UBR	Unified Beneficiary Registry
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNIMA	University of Malawi
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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Executive Summary

The Malawi Social Protection Research Agenda (MSPRA) is a sector-specific extension of the National Research Agenda (NRA), developed to support the achievement of the Malawi National Social Protection Strategy (MNSPS) 2023–2028 through evidence-based policy and practice. It has been commissioned by the Poverty Reduction and Social Protection (PRSP) division of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (MOF EP&D), in support of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). It aims to translate broad national research priorities into concrete areas of inquiry aligned to the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) 2024–2029 and the Malawi National Social Protection Strategy's (MNSPS). The sector's ongoing transition to a lifecycle approach, and the complexity of the challenges it faces, make this focused, sector-level response both necessary and timely.

The MSPRA was developed through four complementary activities: a desk review of 191 studies published or produced between 2015 and 2026; key informant interviews (KIs) with 18 respondents spanning government, academia, development partners, think-tanks and civil society; a stakeholder survey; and two workshops (with more than 50 representatives). Together, these activities provide both a systematic picture of the existing evidence base and a grounded understanding of the structural conditions that shape how social protection research is produced and used in Malawi. Key findings are discussed below.

Key findings:

- The desk review included the review of more than 600 studies, and identified 191 relevant studies, of which 110 (58%) are peer-reviewed articles and 46 (24%) are development partner reports. Research volume has grown significantly, rising from 34 studies in 2015–2017 to 69 in 2021–2023.
- Social cash transfers dominate the evidence base (56 studies), followed by livelihoods and productive programmes (35) and shock-responsive SP (27).

Social insurance, the informal economy and political economy/governance are the most underrepresented themes.

- KIs (18 respondents) highlighted donor dependency, political interference, fragmentation and limited capacity building as the most pressing research challenges. The persistence of a largely static social registry was identified as a further constraint with significant implications for social protection research. Across discussions, a recurring observation was the weak translation of existing evidence into policy, pointing to a persistent research-to-policy disconnect.
- The top research priorities emerging from KIs were sustainable financing, graduation evidence, political economy, impact evaluation, cash plus evidence, and the inclusion of minority groups.

The proposed research priorities were derived from these findings and organised into five thematic areas: (i) enabling environment and governance; (ii) targeting, systems, and delivery; (iii) lifecycle and cross-cutting themes; (iv) shock-responsive social protection; and (v) monitoring, evaluation, and learning. These priorities are grounded in and aligned with key sectoral policy frameworks. See page 16 for the suggested research priorities.

MoFEA/PRSP, as social protection sector lead, should anchor the operational framework. To provide structure through which research commissioning decisions flow, ensuring alignment, transparency, and knowledge sharing across the research ecosystem. A standing research update should be added to the quarterly National Social Protection Technical Committee agenda. To safeguard research integrity, an independent third party or peer review mechanism should assess the viability and complementarity of planned studies prior to commissioning. As the MSPRA runs concurrently with the MNPS 2023–2028, a review and update should be initiated by 2028. The research log in Annex 1 should be treated as a living repository, updated continuously and used as the primary reference for tracking progress.

The operationalisation of the MSPRA is further defined around four pillars: (1) Sustainable and strategic research financing; (2) Strong coordination and communication; (3) Cross-sectoral integrated research activities; and (4) Strong local research capacity.

1. **Sustainable and strategic research financing.** Donor dependency remains the most frequently cited challenge, with research priorities often shaped by external rather than national objectives. A dedicated, predictable research fund—whether structured as a single-donor mechanism, aligned with the Multi-Donor Trust Fund philosophy, or as a ring-fenced proportion of programme budgets—would provide the stability needed for a coherent, long-term research programme. A modest domestic financial contribution would signal national ownership. The fund would operate through a biannual or annual call for proposals led by MoFEA/PRSP, with transparent ranking by an independent review committee. Research resources should be strategically directed toward foundational gaps in sustainable financing, governance, and legislation—areas of high policy priority but low research investment.
2. **Coordination and communication.** A sector-wide research coordination mechanism with clearly defined roles should be established to reduce duplication and align commissioning to policy and planning cycles. Regular, institutionalised forums—including an annual SP research forum and thematic seminars—would bring researchers and practitioners together, strengthen knowledge sharing, and reduce siloed working. A centralised, publicly accessible living repository of SP studies, ideally hosted by MoFEA/PRSP or a Malawian academic institution, would consolidate the existing evidence base.
3. **Integrated and cross-sectoral research.** Research commissioning should shift from programme-specific to sector-wide evidence generation, prioritising studies that cut across programmes, disaggregate findings by lifecycle stage, and address cross-cutting themes such as the climate–social protection nexus, cash-plus approaches, and nutrition linkages. Multi-sectoral research partnerships should be actively facilitated.

4. **Local research capacity.** Partnering with Malawian universities to embed social protection within postgraduate curricula would build a pipeline of locally trained researchers. Dedicated capacity building provisions within the research fund—including support for conference participation and methodological training—would further strengthen domestic research capacity. Mechanisms to engage Malawian academic institutions as substantive research partners, not only as data collectors, are essential to building a sustainable, nationally owned evidence base.

Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

Malawi is faced with longstanding and widespread vulnerability, which has been exacerbated by climate-induced shocks. Over half of Malawi's population lives below the national poverty line and the majority remains dependent on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods.¹ High levels of chronic poverty, compounded by recurring climate shocks, food insecurity, and limited economic opportunities, expose a significant share of the population to persistent vulnerability. In response, the Government of Malawi, with support from development partners, has established a social protection system anchored in several social safety nets, social insurance, and labour market programmes. While these interventions have made meaningful strides in reaching the poorest and most vulnerable households, the system continues to face considerable challenges, including limited fiscal space, heavy reliance on donor financing, conflicting priorities, and insufficient coverage relative to the scale of need.²

Strengthening, harmonizing and expanding social protection remains a critical priority to minimise life cycle risks and empower the people of Malawi to contribute to their own and to national development. The National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) and Malawi National Social Protection Strategy (MNSPS)³ 2024-2029 mark a deliberate shift from household poverty-targeting towards a lifecycle approach. Social protection in Malawi is coordinated by variety of stakeholders—including the government, key line ministries, and several development partners—who lead the implementation of the NSPP and MNSPS. The NSPP and MNSSP I (2013-2016) and II (2018-2023) key shifts include the adoption of a lifecycle approach; strengthened systems; expanded shock-responsive mechanisms; and a commitment to operationalise a contributory social security. A 2021 mid-term review of the predecessor strategy (MNSSP II) identified weak monitoring, evaluation and learning

¹ World Bank 2023.

² Government of Malawi 2023b.

³ Developed by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs Department of Economic Planning and Development (MOF EP&D EP&D).

(MEL), inclusion/exclusion errors, low transfer values, fragmented programme coordination, and donor dependency as persistent challenges.⁴

The MNSPS is explicit that research and evidence must drive implementation. Structured research is essential to generate a strong evidence base to inform policy, improve performance, and generate in-depth learning and knowledge to address emerging vulnerabilities and implementation challenges. Yet, the 2021 mid-term review found that, key structures lacked the necessary evidence and mechanisms to coordinate, commission and utilise research, a gap that this research agenda seeks to address.

1.2 Alignment to national frameworks

This Malawi Social Protection Research Agenda (MSPRA) aims to be an extension of the National Research Agenda (NRA)⁵. While the NRA provides the overarching national framework for research priorities under Malawi's Vision 2063 and its first 10-year Implementation Plan (MIP-1) 2021–2030, the complexity and evolving nature of social protection systems—and the sector's transition to a lifecycle approach—warrant a more focused, sector-specific response. The MSPRA deepens and operationalises the NRA's Human Capital Development pillar, specifically its Social Welfare theme. It is intended to guide researchers, government agencies, academic institutions, development partners, NGOs and civil society organisations in generating the knowledge that the Malawi's social protection policy and practice need to be effective, inclusive, equitable and sustainable.

The MSPRA's key research areas are based on the NSPP, MNSPS and NRA priority areas as defined in Box 1 below.

⁴ Government of Malawi 2023b.

⁵ Developed by the National Commission for Science and Technology and the National Planning Commission.

Box 1. Social Protection Priority Areas among the NSPP, MNSPS and NRA.

The NSPP priority areas are the following:

1. **Social Safety Nets** – refers to Malawi's flagship interventions designed to cover the poor and vulnerable from extreme poverty and social exclusion.
2. **Resilient Livelihoods** – refers to interventions aimed at building resilience to withstand and/or recover from a wide range of shocks.
3. **Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection** – refers to the integration of nutritional outcomes in social protection to address nutritional and food security needs.
4. **Shock-Sensitive Social Protection** – refers to the design of interventions that respond to and mitigate the impact of shocks.
5. **Social Security** – refers to the insurance of health care and income security, including among those involved in informal work.
6. **Creating an Enabling Environment for Social Protection Systems** – refers to the strengthening of a robust system with supportive policies, strong institutional frameworks and adequate financial resources.
7. **Cross-cutting issues** – refer to those that intersect with various aspects, such as gender equality, disability inclusion, environment sustainability and food security.

The NSPP result areas are the following:

1. **Enabling environment** – this covers strategy, policy and legislation; governance and coordination; human capacity; financing; and shock response.
2. **Systems** – covering advocacy, outreach and communication; registration, enrolment and case management; payments, grievance redress; and management systems.
3. **Programmes** – protecting people at each stage of the lifecycle, considering gender, nutrition, disability and other relevant cross-cutting themes.

Box 1. Social Protection Priority Areas among the NSPP, MNSPS and NRA.

4. **Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)** – enhancing the effectiveness of social protection policy and practice through systematic, locally grounded evidence generation and use

The NRA research pillar 8 on Human Development themes include:

1. Legislation and Institutional Capacity Building
2. Education and Skills Development
3. Science, Technology, and Innovation
4. Health and Nutrition
5. Managing Population Growth
6. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)
7. Sports and Creative Arts
8. Gender Equality and Equity
9. **Social Welfare**
 - Catalytic and transformative social cash transfer systems
 - Child protection systems to reduce vulnerability, violence, abuse, and exploitation
 - Targeted mechanisms for social safety nets

The table below indicates how the MSPRA priority research areas align with the priority areas of these key sectoral documents.

MSPRA Research areas	NSPP priority area	MNPS result area	NRA pillar 8 link
1. Enabling environment & governance	Priority Area 6	Result Area 1	Theme 1
2. Targeting, systems & delivery	Priority Areas 1 & 6	Result Area 2	Theme 9

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Box 1. Social Protection Priority Areas among the NSPP, MNSPS and NRA.

3. Lifecycle & cross cutting themes	Priority Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Result Area 3	Theme 9, 2, 4, 6, and 8
4. Shock-responsive SP	Priority Area 4	Result Areas 1 & 3	Theme 9
5. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning	Across all areas	Result Area 4	Across all areas

Source: NSPP 2024-2029, MNSPS 2024-2029, and NRA Operationalizing MIP-1 (2023).

1.3 Purpose and objectives of the MSPRA

The main objective of this MSPRA is guide researchers, academic institutions, think-tanks, Centres of Excellence (CoE), local and international social protection research and development stakeholders in generating knowledge that accelerate progress in addressing poverty, vulnerability, and inequality, ensuring that its social protection system is evidence-based, responsive, sustainable, and effective in meeting the needs of all its citizens. The MSPRA is aligned with the strategic priorities of the NSPP, MNSPS and over-arching NRA, covering cross-cutting areas. Specifically, the research agenda aims to:

- Provide prioritised social protection research areas that will guide research.
- Facilitate and enhance multidisciplinary and multi-institutional coordination and collaboration in the implementation of research.
- Increase uptake of research outputs.
- Provide impetus for effective resource mobilisation for social protection research.
- Promote research that address implementation challenges.

1.4 Development Process

The MSPRA was developed through a mixed-methods approach across four phases:

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- **Phase 1 – Desk review and literature mapping:** A systematic review of social protection studies published or conducted in Malawi between 2015 and the first quarter of 2026, catalogued in a structured research log by theme and implementing actor. Over 600 studies were identified.
- **Phase 2 – Gap analysis:** The existing evidence base was mapped against the NSPP priority areas, MNSPS result areas and NRA themes to identify knowledge gaps—areas where strategic commitments lack sufficient evidence to guide design and implementation. These areas are described in Box 1.
- **Phase 3 – Consultations:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from implementing ministries, donors and development partners, Malawian universities, and several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) (see table 1). Additionally, a workshop was organised to review findings from the gap analysis and launch discussions among stakeholders regarding priority areas. Finally, a survey was sent to key stakeholders to provide additional insights. These activities validated gaps, added locally identified priorities and assessed stakeholder capacity to conduct research.
- **Phase 4 – Validation workshop:** A multi-stakeholder workshop reviewed and validated priority research questions and recommendations for the MSPRA.

Annex 1 offers a comprehensive, though non-exhaustive, overview of recent, ongoing, and planned social protection studies in Malawi (Phase 1). Annex 2 documents the process underpinning this MSPRA, covering identified knowledge and policy gaps, priority research questions, and a stakeholder analysis of key actors, roles, and areas of interest in the social protection research landscape (Phase 2-4).

Table 1. List of involved stakeholders

Government	Academia	Development Partners & others	
MOF EP&D*	UNIMA*	UNICEF*	IFPRI*
NPC*	UNIMA - CSR	EU delegation*	Give Directly

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Government	Academia	Development Partners & others	
NLGFC*	LUANAR*	Embassy of Ireland	WFP
DoDMA*	MUST*	KfW	Save the Children
NSO*	Malawi School of Government*	GIZ	FAO
MoGCDSW	Magomero College	ILO	CSSPN
District Councils of Mzimba, Neno & Zomba	Mwapata Institute for Agricultural Research	Women and Girls Disability Rights	SIAM

*Note: The * indicates institutions with whom a KII has taken place.*

MNSPS Research themes and priority questions

Evidence is the foundation of effective policy advocacy and, when communicated well—through research forums and platforms such as the main SP donor group or SP technical and Steering Committees—it has the power to translate policy commitments into practice. This chapter describes research areas directly aligned to the strategic outcomes of the MNSPS, recognising that the generation and use of evidence is not a parallel activity to implementation but an integral part of it. Central to this is the MNSPS commitment to establishing a comprehensive, standardised MEL system operationalised across all programmes. A functional MEL system is not merely a reporting requirement, it is the mechanism through which the sector can determine whether interventions are achieving their intended outcomes, identify what is not working and make informed, timely adjustments. Without it, programme improvements remain reactive rather than systematic, and the sector's ability to advocate for investment and policy change on the basis of credible evidence is fundamentally weakened.

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2.1 Enabling Environment and governance

The MNSPS identifies a strong enabling environment as its foundational result area, encompassing policy, legislation, governance, human capacity, financing and shock response. An absent legislation, weak coordination, donor dependency and limited domestic financing, all create the conditions that undermine all other programmatic investments. To address these issues, policy advocacy research to inform the institutionalisation of social protection, including but not limited to cross-sectoral impact evaluations, investment cases, and feasibility studies, are necessary.

Table 2. Research areas for an Enabling Environment

Strategic area	Research areas
Institutional framework	• Drivers and consequences of social protection institutional and policy designs. • Impact of political economy (specifically political patronage) on social protection design, implementation and delivery.
Governance & coordination	• Design of a system of social protection interventions that are complementary and mutual reinforcing in their impact, with regular reviews of the policy and coverage of the SP system. • Synergy of different social protection programmes, to assess cross-sectoral impact. • The impact of coordination gaps across social protection programmes in Malawi on targeting, efficiency, and beneficiary outcomes. • Assessing how district-level coordination structures can be strengthened to close the gap between national governance and local implementation.

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Strategic area	Research areas
	• Quality of services and efficiency of national and local level social protection structures.
Human capacity	• Evaluations of current and different coordination structures, and their impact on implementation.
Financing	• Domestic financing pathways, fiscal space and political economy of increasing government ownership of social protection, including lessons from comparable country transitions. • Full costing of the lifecycle social protection system at adequate coverage and transfer levels, and modelling of financing scenarios. • Explore the feasibility and design of innovative financing mechanisms, including budget support arrangements and earmarked taxation.

2.2 Targeting, Systems and Delivery

The operational delivery system is the backbone of social protection. The MNSPS commits to a comprehensive, dynamic MSR interoperable with national management information systems, a harmonised multi-channel e-payment system, and accessible grievance redress mechanisms. Inclusion and exclusion errors, data quality challenges, fragmented MIS—where parallel systems across programmes impede data sharing, deduplication, and coherent case management—and limited district capacity all require evidence-based solutions.

Table 3. Research areas for Targeting, Systems and Delivery

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Strategic area	Research areas
Advocacy, outreach and communication	• Perception of social protection as a dependency versus empowerment tool among government, practitioners and the population. • Understanding of the various aspects of resilience building among households in the Malawian context and the role of social protection therein. • Effectiveness of different community sensitisation approaches, mobilisation and engagement strategies.
Registration, enrolment and case management	• Targeting efficacy in rural compared to urban areas. • Examining inclusion and exclusion error rates, and differences in operational costs, under lifecycle-based targeting, compared to household poverty targeting. • Assess the feasibility and costs and of transitioning from a census-based to an on-demand dynamic MSR. • Examine the data quality implications of such a transition for targeting accuracy. • Coverage, adequacy and sustainability of existing contributory schemes. • Evaluating the design and effectiveness of CS-EPWP. • Evidence on programme reach, barriers and design for urban and peri-urban populations. • Assessing the extent of accessibility and responsiveness of grievance redress mechanisms during targeting.
Payments	• The functioning of a harmonised e-payment system, especially the beneficiary experience among women, older people, people with disabilities and geographically remote populations.

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Strategic area	Research areas
	• Cost-effectiveness and reliability of different payment channels across diverse geographic and infrastructure contexts in Malawi, especially areas with low electrification. • Differential impact of lumpsum versus sustained social protection support. • Assess relation between payment modalities, financial inclusion outcomes and grievance incidences.
Grievance redress	• Barriers of uptake and perception of GRM among beneficiaries. • Reach and effectiveness of redress mechanism for marginalised populations. • Resolution rates and satisfaction across programmes, districts, beneficiaries.
Management systems	• Assess the current state of MIS interoperability across programmes and the practical barriers to integration. • Assess the data architecture, institutional roles and technical improvements to make a sector-wide integrated MIS feasible. • Evaluate the role of data governance in strengthening social protection management Information systems. • Assess the impact and gaps of user capacity and training on the utilization of social protection Management Information Systems.

2.3 Lifecycle programmes and cross-cutting themes

This theme is the primary focus of the NRA's Social Welfare and Gender Equality and Equity priorities. It addresses the core programmatic content of the NSPP and MNPS across the lifecycle. Research must generate evidence at each stage of the

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lifecycle, as well as on cross-cutting linkages, with gender and disability dimensions mainstreamed across all initiatives.

Table 4. Research areas for Lifecycle programming

Strategic area	Research areas
Pregnant women and infants (0-5)	• Synergy of SCTP. • Feasibility of maternal and infant benefits. • Impact evaluation of the implementation of the Nutrition Sensitive Social Protection Operational Framework (including nutrition-linked bonuses) on ante-natal care attendance, facility births, immunisation, growth monitoring and birth registration. • Drivers of health-seeking behaviour amongst SP beneficiaries. • Assess gaps in social protection programs for pregnant women and children under five and the Implications for maternal and child wellbeing.
School-age children (6-17)	• Synergy of education-related interventions in SP programmes on children's schooling, nutrition, and health, and gender parity. • Feasibility of integrating child protection and GBV prevention linkages into social protection targeting school-age children.
Working age (18-64)	• Synergy of livelihoods, public works, savings and loans, and skills interventions to produce sustainable income generation and poverty exit for different subgroups of working-age adults.

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Strategic area	Research areas
	• The impact of CS-EPWP on beneficiaries (specifically youth unemployment), and their spillover effects for household welfare. • Barriers leading to the increasing youth unemployment. • Linkages between labour market programmes and social insurance contributions to extend decent work protections, particularly for peri-urban and seasonal workers. • The impact of social protection programmes on labour market mobility and the likelihood of formalisation • Risks of disincentivising formalisation through poor scheme social protection design.
Older persons (65+)	• Simulated design options, impact and cost-benefit of the three-tier Social Pension under the Older Persons Act as proposed in the MNSPS. • Operationalisation of the social pension. • Assessment of the health, dignity, inclusion outcomes and child sensitivity associated with regular support to older people.

Table 5. Research areas in cross-cutting themes

Strategic area	Research areas
Gender	• Assess the gendered impacts of different social protection programmes on women's economic empowerment, protection from gender-based violence, and intra-household bargaining power and changes to women's decision-making power.

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Strategic area	Research areas
	• Identify programme design features which strengthen these outcomes. • Gender dynamics in the formal economy.
Disability	• To what extent the current social protection system identifies, registers and serves people with disabilities, and what specific adaptations are needed. • Disability-related extra costs and implications for inclusive social protection.
Nutrition	• Synergy of social protection initiatives, behavioural change activities and nutrition-sensitive linkages (cash-plus) to agriculture and community nutrition structures to produce the best nutritional outcomes.
Labour	• Barriers to uptake, willingness to contribute and viable design models of social security (formal and informal). • Identifying and assessing affordable, innovative scheme designs are viable in Malawi's economic context. • Assess current and potential formalisation of informal social protection mechanisms.
Resilience & livelihoods	• Conditions under which households sustainably exit poverty through livelihoods programmes. • Evidence on cash-plus linkages and cross-sectoral interventions. • Role of savings and loans groups in supporting resilience among social protection beneficiaries, particularly for women and people with disabilities. • Evidence of social protection interventions' impact across the lifecycle.

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Strategic area	Research areas
	• Evaluation of AIP and COMSIP as an effective social protection tool.
Macro-economic effects	• How to ensure the adequacy of transfer levels in highly inflation context/varying. • Evaluating the inflationary impact of cash injections and maize in-kind support. • The impact of CS-EPWP and Loan Savings activities on labour market and economic growth.
Cross-cutting	• How can cash-plus models linking social assistance to health, nutrition, agriculture and ECD services be designed and evaluated under the lifecycle framework to maximise outcomes across multiple stages?

2.4 Shock-responsive and climate-sensitive social protection

Malawi is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The lean season (resulting in up to 6 months of food insecurity), floods and cyclones are major drivers of poverty and a persistent threat to the gains already made by social protection programmes. The NSPP designates shock-sensitive social protection as Priority Area 4. The country has extensive experience to learn from, with the CUCI COVID-19 response, annual lean season cash transfers, and the several Cyclone responses.

Table 6. Research areas for Shock-sensitive social protection

Strategic area	Research areas
Shock-response and Anticipatory action	• Integration of social protection with Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). • Development of a Disaster Risk Management Information System for better tracking.

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Strategic area	Research areas
Climate-sensitive social protection	• Scalability of current social protection interventions. • How do recurrent climate shocks interact with poverty dynamics across the lifecycle, and which population groups face compound vulnerability from the intersection of climate exposure, lifecycle stage, gender and disability?

Operationalisation of the MSPRA

This chapter sets out the operationalisation of the MSPRA, in alignment with the NRA, running from 2026-2030. To embed this agenda within a formal operational framework, the social protection sector lead, MOF EP&D/PRSP, with the mandate to ensure alignment, transparency, capacity building and knowledge sharing across the research ecosystem, could provide the structure through which research commissioning decisions flow. This mechanism would sustain research communication and dialogue through semi-regular research dissemination forums that bring together researchers and practitioners to share findings, maintain the social protection research repository, coordinate efforts and address research priorities across the lifecycle. Additionally, a standing agenda to update on ongoing research could be added to the National Social Protection Technical Committee meetings (held quarterly), and/or Social Protection Week. To reinforce local research activities, some of these efforts could be implemented in partnership with an academic institution.

To support the delivery of priority research, it is recommended to set up an overarching financing mechanism with clearly defined processes for allocating resources to identified research needs. A dedicated research fund would also promote collaboration by convening stakeholders around shared findings, building cumulative knowledge across initiatives. One option proposed during the validation process is to channel such a fund through the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF), though

this would require further consultation with and confirmation by relevant stakeholders before adoption.

Importantly, to safeguard the integrity of research prioritisation and avoid conflicts of interest, the judgment of which research proposals to fund should rest with independent reviewers who have no relationship to the applicants. This does not require a dedicated TWG for every study, but rather that the allocation procedures for any research fund incorporate an independent third party and/or peer review mechanisms (e.g. scholars or experts not involved in the national Malawian process) to assess the viability, necessity, complementarity and financing requirements of planned research efforts before they are commissioned.

Finally, as this MSPRA runs concurrently with the MNSPS 2023–2028, a review and update should be initiated by 2028 to incorporate findings from completed studies, respond to emerging evidence needs and prepare the knowledge base for the NSPP five-year review. The research repository shared in Annex 1 should be treated as a living document, updated continuously as new studies are completed or identified, and used as the primary reference for tracking progress against this agenda.

The operationalisation is further defined below across four pillars: (1) **Sustainable, high-quality and strategic research financing**; (2) **Strong coordination and communication**; (3) **Cross-sectoral integrated research activities**; (4) **Strong local research capacity**.

1. Ensure sustainable, high-quality and strategic research financing

- **Prioritise research on enabling environment gaps.** Sustainable financing, governance and legislation received among the lowest research investment in the existing literature while emerging as top priorities in the KII. Research resources should be strategically directed toward these foundational areas.
- **Coordinate research financing across development partners by establishing a dedicated, predictable funding mechanism for social policy and social protection research.** Donor dependency was the most frequently cited challenge across all KIIs, reflecting a sector where research priorities are often

shaped by donor objectives rather than national needs, and where government ownership of the evidence agenda remains limited. Research is currently financed on a study-by-study basis by individual development partners, with no pooled or predictable funding mechanism to support a coherent, long-term research programme. Establishing a dedicated research fund—whether funded by a single donor, or as a separate provision in line with the MDTF philosophy or as a ring-fenced proportion of programme budgets through the Social Protection Development Partners Group—would provide the stability needed for a rolling, coordinated research programme aligned to national priorities. A meaningful, even if modest, domestic financial contribution to such a mechanism would be an important signal of ownership and commitment to a nationally driven evidence agenda. The operational mechanisms for the using the fund are explained under the next bullet point.

- **The operational manual for the National Social Protection Policy Research Fund** would foresee call for proposals every 6 months or every year, led by MOF EP&D/PRSP. Research proposals can be filed by relevant Malawian institutes as the leading partner (eventually in collaboration with non-Malawian institutes) and need to encompass a fully-fledged research proposal including, research questions, an elaborated methodology, a team of researchers, a realistic implementation plan and budget. Research proposals should be ranked by a committee of reviewers (drawn from development partners, CSOs and government) not involved in any of the proposals or with direct links to one of the applying institutes. Government bodies and donors can rank the proposals themselves as well. Transparent ranking mechanisms should be used to allocate resources and fund as many ranked studies that the budget can cover. Mechanisms establishing multiyear budgets and projects should be developed. All research projects covered by the budget should have the obligations to report on research progress at least once a year in an annual conference and on the quarterly basis and in an online open-access forum; see also next section. The funding mechanisms can also be used to stimulate

and reward all forms of collaboration between Malawian institutes; see also section 3 below.

2. Strengthen coordination and communication

- **Establish a sector-wide social protection research coordination mechanism.** Fragmentation and misaligned agendas reflect the absence of any standing structure to share what is being studied, avoid duplication and align commissioning to policy needs. A coordination mechanism with clearly defined roles, oriented towards the life-cycle—such as described in the MNSPS— and an institutionalised social protection act would address this barrier directly. This coordination mechanism should be led by MOF EP&D/PRSP and include development partners, civil society organisations, NGOs, and representatives of vulnerable populations—including those focused on disability and gender—to ensure cross-cutting priorities are systematically reflected in research commissioning and coordination.
- **Align research commissioning and dissemination to policy and planning cycles.** Misalignment between research timelines and policy cycles was raised by multiple KII respondents. Evidence generated too late for a policy window, or communicated only through technical reports, is often unused. Commissioning decisions should be explicitly mapped, in line with the NSPP and MNSPS agenda, and with budget cycles.
- **Create regular, institutionalised channels for research communication and dialogue.** Research findings are frequently not disseminated beyond their commissioning organisation, limiting the broader utility of existing evidence and perpetuating knowledge gaps that may already have been addressed elsewhere. Hence, events that bring researchers and practitioners together in a shared space—whether through annual research forums, thematic seminars or peer learning exchanges—would serve to strengthen coordination, reduce fragmentation and identify overlaps and duplication of effort across institutions and programmes. To have lasting impact, these channels must be institutionalised rather than ad hoc and aligned to the policy cycles through

which social protection decisions are made. One potential forum to share updates on ongoing research is the National Social Protection Technical Committee, the Social Protection Week, in addition to the proposed Annual SP research forum.

3. Reduce fragmentation and promote integrated cross-sectoral research

- **Promote data and evidence sharing across institutions.** The prevalence of data silos and siloed implementation across institutions and programmes reflects a deeper structural gap: the absence of shared data infrastructure and coordinated knowledge management systems within the social protection sector. A centralised, accessible and dynamic log or repository for social protection studies and—where ethical and feasible—anonymised programme data, would make the existing evidence base more useful. Ideally this repository should be held by MOF EP&D/PRSP and be accessible online by the public. However, another potential solution is to engage with an institution of higher education to maintain and grow this repository.
- **Move from programme-specific to sector-wide evidence generation.** The desk review found that research in Malawi's social protection sector is predominantly programme-specific, with cross-programme and cross-sectoral evidence remaining comparatively scarce. Research commissioning should increasingly prioritise studies that cut across programmes and disaggregate findings by lifecycle stage, in line with the MNSPS's strategic outcomes. This is particularly important for cross-cutting priorities—such as the climate–social protection nexus, cash-plus approaches and nutrition–social protection linkages—where the evidence base spans multiple sectors. Addressing these gaps will require deliberate facilitation of multi-sectoral research partnerships that bring together social protection, health, agriculture, climate and other relevant actors around shared research questions. These studies could be the focus of support from the **National Social Protection Policy Research Fund**.

4. Build research capacity within Malawian institutions

- **Embed social protection research within university curricula and postgraduate programmes.** Partnering with Malawian universities to develop postgraduate modules, dissertations and thesis topics aligned to the priority areas of this agenda would create a pipeline of locally trained researchers with sector-specific expertise. It is noted that ongoing efforts to develop a Bachelor's degree in Social Protection in a Malawian institution of higher education could address this recommendation.
- **Create facilities for Malawian researchers to enhance their research skills.** Depending on the demand from the researchers and the research institute, dedicated capacity building courses on specific topics or specific methodologies could be set up. The training workshops could be provided by Malawian and international training staff and facilitators. It may be that a separate (relatively small) budget in the National Research Social Protection Research Fund can be defined to cover the costs of this type of capacity development. It may also be that the fund can stimulate Malawian researchers to participate in conferences, capacity building courses or trainings offered elsewhere.
- **Strengthen structured engagement of Malawian academic institutions.** The current research model is not building the lasting local capacity that a sustainable, nationally owned evidence base requires. Mechanisms to engage Malawian universities—in research design and analysis, not only as data collectors or validators—would progressively build a domestically grounded evidence base. Addressing this requires more than engagement, it requires opening access to administrative and programme data, creating dedicated funding streams for Malawian-led studies, and establishing formal research partnerships between lead ministries, implementing ministries and Malawian universities that go beyond ad hoc collaboration.

Annex 1 Social Protection research repository

Reference	Title
Abdoulayi et al. (2016)	Impact of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme on Household Resilience
Abid et al. (2020)	Ex-ante and ex-post coping strategies for climatic shocks and adaptation determinants in rural Malawi
AgeInternational (2021)	Older women: the hidden workforce
Aggarwal et al (2024)	The Dynamic Effects of Cash Transfers to Agricultural Households
Aggarwal et al. (2023)	Shortening the Path to Productive Investment: Evidence from Input Fairs and Cash Transfers in Malawi
Ajefu, Efobi & Beecroft (2020)	Coping with negative shocks and the role of the farm input subsidy programme in rural Malawi
Anagol, Fujiware & Navarrete (2025)	Conditioning Out the Poor? Consumption Inequality and the Design of Cash Transfer Programs
Angeles et al. (2016)	The Social Cash Transfer Programme of Malawi: The Role of Evaluation from the Pilot to the Expansion
Angeles et al. (2019)	Government of Malawi's unconditional cash transfer improves youth mental health
Ansell et al. (2019)	Social cash transfers, generational relations and youth poverty trajectories in rural Lesotho and Malawi
Archibald (2024)	The Political Economy of Shock-Responsive Social Protection: Analysis from Malawi
Archibald & Open PEA (2026)	The Practical Politics of Cash versus maize in Malawi
Aung et al. (2021)	Energy access and the ultra-poor: Do unconditional social cash transfers close the energy access gap in Malawi?

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Baez et al. (2019)	Adaptive Safety Nets for Rural Africa: Drought-Sensitive Targeting with Sparse Data
Baez et al. (2024)	Drought-sensitive targeting and child growth faltering in Southern Africa.
Baker et al. (2025)	Identifying Family and Community-based Care Solutions for Children with Albinism.
Banda (2021)	Do Social Cash Transfers Trap Beneficiaries into Poverty? A Remedial Recommendation for Malawi
Banks et al. (2025)	The Impact of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme on Financial Well-Being among People with and without Disabilities: A Disaggregated Analysis of a Cluster Randomized Control Trial
Banounin et al. (2025)	Social Protection and HIV risk Factors among Youth in Southern Africa: An Analysis of Cross-sectional Population-based HIV Impact Assessment Surveys
Basurto et al. (2017)	Decentralization and Efficiency of Subsidy Targeting: Evidence from Chiefs in Rural Malawi
Beegle, Galasso & Goldberg (2017)	Direct and Indirect Effects of Malawi's Public Works Program on Food Security
Beegle, Galasso & Goldberg (2017)	Direct and indirect effects of Malawi's public works program on food security
Beierl & Dodlova (2022)	Public Works Programmes and Cooperation for the Common Good: Evidence from Malawi
Bharadwaj, Karthikeyan and Mitchell (2024)	Food security in changing climates: social protection must respond to unfolding crises
Bhushan et al. (2022)	Probable perinatal depression and social support among women enrolled in Malawi's Option B+ Program: A longitudinal analysis.

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Bliznashka et al. (2024)	Effect of combining lower- and higher-value monthly cash transfers with nutrition-sensitive agriculture, male engagement, and psychosocial intervention on maternal depressive symptoms in rural Malawi: a secondary analysis of a cluster-randomised controlled trial
Brenyah (2018)	Implementation of Social Protection Interventions in Africa. 'The Trend in the Outcomes of Free Basic Education in Ghana, Malawi, Kenya and Uganda'
Brugh et al. (2018)	Impacts of the Malawi social cash transfer program on household food and nutrition security
Brune et al. (2017)	Savings Defaults and Payment Delays for Cash Transfers: Field Experimental Evidence from Malawi
Brune, Kerwin and Li (2022)	How Important Is Temptation Spending? Maybe Less than We Thought
Burchi & Roscioli (2021)	Can Integrated Social Protection Programmes Affect Social Cohesion? Mixed-methods Evidence from Malawi
Burchi & Strupat (2019)	What makes economic empowerment programmes successful? Experimental evidence from Malawi
Burchi et al (2025)	Do public works programmes foster climate resilience? Conceptual framework and review of empirical evidence
CALP network (2023)	Adapting Cash Programming to Inflation, Depreciation and Economic Volatility in Malawi
Cardona & Caruso (2022)	Malawi Poverty Assessment: Poverty Persistence in Malawi - Climate Shocks, Low Agricultural Productivity, and Slow Structural Transformation
Care International (2019)	What does gender-sensitive cash and voucher assistance look like?
Care International (2020)	Gender Implications of Cash Transfers in Malawi

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Chakrabarti & Handa (2023)	The Impacts of Cash Transfers on Household Energy Choices
Chakrabarti, Harou, Fanzo & Palm (2023)	Exploring agriculture-child nutrition pathways: Evidence from Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Program
Chilala & Kambewa (2026)	Gender Implications of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme in Machinga District, Malawi
Chinsinga (2021)	The Political Economy of Resilience and Adaptation in Malawi
Chipanta et al. (2022)	Access to Social Protection by People Living with, at Risk of, or Affected by HIV in Eswatini, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia: Results from Population-Based HIV Impact Assessments
Chirwa et al. (2016)	Rapid Assessment of the Eligibility of SCTP beneficiaries
Choularton et al. (2023)	Technical Analysis to Inform the Trigger Design for Adaptive Safety Nets to Respond to Climate Shocks in Malawi
Collishaw, Maggio and Gelli (2024)	Nutrition-Sensitive Cash Transfers and Lean Season Food Insecurity
Concern (2020)	The Case for Cash in Responding to Humanitarian Crises in Malawi
Concern Worldwide (2021)	Knowledge matters - Concern's experience and learning from the Graduation Approach
Daidone et al. (2019)	The Household and Individual-Level Productive Impacts of Cash Transfer Programs in Sub-Saharan Africa
Daidone, Pellegrini & Sitko (2023)	Evaluating the impacts of promoting coherence between disaster risk reduction, climate action and social protection in Malawi: Baseline analysis and programmatic implications of a Farmer Field School approach
Dake et al. (2018)	Cash Transfers, Early Marriage, and Fertility in Malawi and Zambia

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Daly et al. (2020)	Challenges and Opportunities in China's Health Aid to Africa: Findings from Qualitative Interviews in Tanzania and Malawi
Davis et al. (2016)	From Evidence to Action: The Story of Cash Transfers and Impact Evaluation in Sub-Saharan Africa
de Barra & Molloy (2018)	Gender and Cash-Based Programming in Malawi: Lessons from Concern World wide's humanitarian and development experience
de Hoop et al. (2020)	Cash Transfers, Microentrepreneurial Activity, and Child Work: Evidence from Malawi and Zambia
del Ninno & Mills (2015)	Safety Nets in Africa: Effective Mechanisms to Reach the Poor and Most Vulnerable Safety Nets in Africa: Effective Mechanisms to Reach the Poor and Most Vulnerable
Duchoslav, Kenamu & Thunde (2022)	Targeting hunger or votes? The political economy of humanitarian transfers in Malawi
Dzanja et al. (2015)	The Role of Social Capital in Rural Household Food Security: The Case Study of Dowa and Lilongwe Districts in Central Malawi
Dzikawanda and Velmurugan (2025)	Assessing the Impact of Social Cash Transfer Programme on Poverty Reduction among the Beneficiaries: A Case Study of T/A Kayembe in Dowa District, Malawi.
FAO (2024)	Boosting livelihoods resilience and empowering rural communities to be advocates of social protection in Kenya and Malawi (Advancing social protection in rural Africa: A compendium of impactful case studies)
Faruq & Chirchir (2015)	Assessment of Malawi's Proposed Unified Beneficiary Registry and Information Management Systems for Social Protection in Malawi

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Fatch et al. (2021)	Role of Policies, Stakeholder Programs and Interventions in Agricultural Diversification among Smallholder Farmers: A Case of Lilongwe District in Malawi.
Fisher et al. (2017)	The Livelihood Impacts of Cash Transfers in Sub-Saharan Africa: Beneficiary Perspectives from Six Countries
Flory (2018)	Formal finance and informal safety nets of the poor: Evidence from a savings field experiment
Frempong (2018)	Agricultural Subsidies and Child Labour Evidence from Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme
Gelli et al. (2017)	Lean-Season Food Transfers Affect Children's Diets and Household Food Security: Evidence from a Quasi-Experiment in Malawi.
GiveDirectly (2024)	Cash for Loss and Damage Case Study: Report
GIZ (2019)	Design and Implementation Features of Public Works Programmes
GIZ (2023)	Malawi Social Protection Success Stories
GIZ (2024)	Social protection as an instrument for food and nutrition security
Gondwe et al. (2025)	Social Protection Programmes and Household Resilience in the Face of Repeated Shocks in Malawi
Gondwe, Nankwenya & Goeb (2023)	Patterns of social safety nets, weather shocks, and household food security status in Malawi
Government of Malawi (2016)	Review of the Malawi National Social Support Programme
Government of Malawi (2022)	The Investment case for Social Protection in Malawi
Government of Malawi & UNICEF (2018)	Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme: A comprehensive summary of impacts

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Government of Malawi & UNICEF Malawi (2017)	Review of a Policy Decision – The Automatic Inclusion of Social Cash Transfer Programme Beneficiaries into the Food Emergency Response Caseload
Hamer & Seekings (2019)	Social Assistance, Electoral Competition, and Political Branding in Malawi
Handa et al. (2021)	More evidence on the impact of government social protection in sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana, Malawi, and Zimbabwe
Haug & Bjorn (2017)	Social Protection or Humanitarian Assistance: Contested Input Subsidies and Climate Adaptation in Malawi.
Haworth (2020)	Incorporating Climate Change in Southern African Social Policy: A Malawian Case Study
HelpAge (2024)	Advancing gender equality through social protection in an ageing world
HelpAge (2024)	Impacts of Malawi's Social Cash Transfer on Older People and their Households
Hemsteede (2020)	The implications of power relations at the national and international level on the design and implementation of social cash transfers in Southern Africa
Hemsteede (2023)	Reshaping state–citizen relationships through donor-designed targeting systems in Lesotho and Malawi.
Hemsteede (2023)	Power Relations in Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme: The Flip Side of Domination.
Henninger & Mhango (2017)	One for all – creating a Unified Register for Social Protection Programmes in Malawi
Holmes et al. (2017)	Towards a shock sensitive social protection system for Malawi
Holmes et al. (2018)	Strengthening institutional coordination of social protection in Malawi

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Horesh (2025)	The Impact of Hunger Safety Net Programme on Food Insecurity in Malawi: Evidence from Graduated Beneficiaries
IDS (2019)	Malawi Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) Case Study
Jha Kingra & leach (2023)	How evidence helped address ultra poverty in Malawi
Kachaka (2020)	Review of the Proxy Means Test (PMT) for Social Protection Beneficiaries using IHS4 Data
Kagin et al. (2019)	Local Economy Impacts and Cost-Benefit Analysis of Social Protection and Agricultural Interventions in Malawi
Kaluwa B.M. (2021)	Agricultural Input Subsidies: The Recent Malawi Experience
Karamba & Winters (2015)	Gender and agricultural productivity: implications of the Farm Input Subsidy Program in Malawi
Karlan et al. (2017)	Impact of Savings Groups on the Lives of the Poor
Kayamba-Phiri (2023)	Lessons from Developing District -Level M&E Plans to Implement the National Resilience Strategy
Khattak & Grounds (2024)	Final Report for the Impact Evaluation of the Save the Children Cash for Education in Malawi
Khembo & Chapman (2017)	A formative evaluation of the recovery public works programme in Blantyre City, Malawi.
Khonje et al. (2022)	Does subsidizing legume seeds improve farm productivity and nutrition in Malawi?
Kilburn et al. (2018)	Paying for Happiness: Experimental Results from a Large Cash Transfer Program in Malawi.
Kwasi (2018)	Implementation of Social Protection Interventions in Africa. "The Trend in the Outcomes of Free Basic Education in Ghana, Malawi, Kenya and Uganda"

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Lambon-Quayefio et al (2023)	<i>Government unconditional cash transfers and safe transitions to adulthood in Malawi</i>
Lima et al. (2023)	Multipliers of social protection
Limbikani Mwale et al. (2021)	The negative impact of farm input subsidies on women's agency in Malawi's matrilineal settlements
Lindert et al. (2018)	Rapid Social Registry Assessment: Malawi's Unified Beneficiary Registry (UBR)
Longhurst & Sabates-Wheeler (2019)	Malawi shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) Case Study
Maara et al (2023)	Impacts of cash transfer and "cash plus" programs on self-perceived stress in Africa: Evidence from Ghana, Malawi, and Tanzania
Maganga, Chiwaula & Kambewa (2021)	Climate induced vulnerability to poverty among smallholder farmers: Evidence from Malawi
Mainje et al. (2024)	Long-term sustainability of African school feeding programs, a review
Margolies et al. (2018)	Examining perceptions of food assistance on household food security and resilience in Malawi.
Masi (2026)	Donors, domestic politics and the delay of COVID-19 emergency cash transfers in Malawi.
Matita, Chiwaula, Chirwa & Mazalale (2022a)	Subsidizing improved legume seeds for increased household dietary diversity: Evidence from Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme
Matita, Zingwe and Dizon (2024)	Comparative Impacts of Input Subsidies, Irrigation Investments, and Social Cash Transfers on Food and Nutrition Security in Malawi
Mebrahtu et al. (2022)	Can a combination of interventions accelerate outcomes to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals for young

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	children? Evidence from a longitudinal study in South Africa and Malawi.
Megersa (2019)	Cash Transfer Programmes in High Inflation Contexts
Meier (2024)	Climate Resilience through Shock-Sensitive Social Protection: The Role of Social Protection Systems during Climate Shocks in Malawi
Mesfin & Tessema (2025)	Cash transfers and voting among young women in Malawi
Mesfin and Cecchi (2023)	Cash Transfers and Social Capital: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Malawi
Mhango et al. (2024)	Scaling Digital Delivery in Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Program
Mnyanga, Chirwa & Munthali (2022)	Impact of Safety Nets on Household Coping Mechanisms for COVID-19 Pandemic in Malawi
Molloy, Altincicek & Concern Worldwide (2016)	Gender Analysis for MVAC Emergency Cash Transfer Programme
Morse (2023)	Democratic contestation, organised labour, and pension reform in Ghana and Malawi
Mtocha, Chirwa and Mazalale (2024)	Multidimensional Poverty Changes in Malawi
Murendo, Kairezi & Mazvimavi (2020)	Resilience capacities and household nutrition in the presence of shocks. Evidence from Malawi
Muriuki, Hudson & Fuad (2024)	Household resilience and mitigating strategies to conflicts and shocks: evidence from household data in Uganda and Malawi
Mwale & Kamninga (2024)	Unintended consequences of farm input subsidies: women's contraceptive usage and knock-on effects on children

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Mwale & Kamninga (2025)	Land rights and the impact of farm input subsidies on poverty convergence in Malawi
Mwale, Chirwa, Mchenga & Zabula (2021)	Micro-finance and women's perception of domestic violence in a fragile state
Mwale, Mchenga & Chirwa (2021)	A spatial analysis of out-of-pocket payments for healthcare in Malawi
Mwale, Smith & von Dintel (2022)	Child nutrition and farm input subsidies: The complementary role of early healthcare and nutrition programs in Malawi
Natali et al. (2019)	Exploring the potential of cash transfers to delay early marriage and pregnancy among youth in Malawi and Zambia
Ndlovu (2024)	Social Protection Instruments and Strategies in Southern Africa.
Ndlovu, Nyathi & Ndlovu (2024)	Climate Change Vulnerability, Impact, and Adaptive Capacity of Rural Populace in Malawi: A Systematic Literature Review.
Nesbitt-Ahmed et al. (2017)	Qualitative research on the impacts of social protection on rural women's economic empowerment: Malawi SCTP
Nkhoma (2016)	Cash transfers: ladders or handouts? An analysis of community targeted social cash transfers, Machinga District, Malawi
Nkhoma (2018)	The evolution of agricultural input subsidy programs: contextualizing policy debates in Malawi's AIP
Nkhoma (2025)	Effects of AIP on food poverty alleviation among smallholder farmers in Malawi
Nkhoma et al. (2025)	Do social safety net programs enhance household resilience through improved food security and child nutrition in Malawi?

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Novignon et al. (2022)	The impact of unconditional cash transfers on morbidity and health-seeking behaviour in Africa: evidence from Ghana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe
Novignon et al. (2024)	Impact of Agricultural Input Subsidy on Nutritional Outcomes in Malawi
Novignon, Chirwa & Frempong (2024)	Agricultural input subsidy, food price shocks and malnutrition in Malawi
Nowa (2023)	Risks, Opportunities and Challenges of E-Payment System: The Social Cash Transfer Program in Thyolo District.
Ohrnberger (2020)	The worse the better? Quantile treatment effects of a conditional cash transfer programme on mental health
Okamura, Ohlenburg and Tesliuc (2024)	Scaling up social assistance where data is scarce: Opportunities and limits of novel data and AI
Otchere et al (2022)	Building Resilience through Social Protection: Evidence from Malawi
Ouedraogo et al. (2021)	Cash Transfers for Improved Maternal and Child Health Data: A Pilot Study Supporting Health Management Information System in Malawi
Pace et al. (2018)	One plus one can be greater than two: evaluating synergies of development programmes in Malawi
Payne, Pesando & Kohler (2019)	Private Intergenerational Transfers, Family Structure, and Health in a sub-Saharan African Context
Poole and Clarke (2024)	Making Social Protection Shock-Responsive through Disaster Risk Finance Mechanisms: Synthesis Report
Poole and Plichta (2024)	Emerging lessons on pre-agreed financing for shock-responsive social protection in Malawi
Ramponi et al. (2021)	Informing decisions with disparate stakeholders: cross-sector evaluation of cash transfers in Malawi

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Redinger et al. (2021)	Double benefit? Integrating an early childhood development programme into HIV PMTCT Option B+ services in Malawi
Reimao (2025)	Cash and Change: A Replication and Further Analysis of a Cash Transfer Experiment in Malawi
Remnant et al. (2021)	Disability inclusive employment in urban Malawi: A multi-perspective interview study
Reuben Adeolu, A. (2017)	Can Agricultural Input Subsidy Help The Poor More Than Food Aid Supplies In Malawi?
Richterman et al. (2025)	The effects of government-led cash transfer programmes on behavioural and health determinants of mortality: a difference-in-differences study
Ro & Lee (2026)	Climate shocks, coping strategies, and household resilience: Evidence from a three-wave panel in Malawi
Save the children (2022)	Cost and Affordability of Nutritious Diets in Malawi and the Role of Cash Transfers
Save the children (2023)	An investment case for Child-Sensitive Social Protection
Scader (2019)	Securing Disability Rights through Inclusive Social Protection in Malawi
Schubert (2020)	Beware of the Crocodile: Quantitative Evidence on How Universal Old Age Grants Distort the Social Assistance Systems of Low-Income Countries
Scognamillo & Sitko (2021)	Leveraging social protection to advance climate-smart agriculture: An empirical analysis of the impacts of Malawi's Social Action Fund (MASAF) on farmers' adoption decisions and welfare outcomes
Sherr et al. (2017)	Could cash and good parenting affect child cognitive development? A cross-sectional study in South Africa and Malawi.

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Sherr et al. (2021)	Food Should not be Forgotten: Impacts of Combined Cash Transfer Receipt and Food Security on Child Education and Cognition in South Africa and Malawi
Siachiwena (2020)	The politics of social protection policy reform in Malawi, 2006-2017
Siachiwena (2023)	International donors, domestic politics, and the expansion of social cash transfers in Malawi
Silverstein (2022)	Disability, caregiver ability, and the impact of cash transfer programs on child-level outcomes.
Silverstein et al. (2024)	Do cash transfer programs have different effects on children based on household disability status? Evidence from Malawi and Zambia.
Sirma, Handa & Tsoka (2025)	The timing of the unconditional cash transfers and human capital accumulation: experimental evidence from Malawi
Sitko et al. (2021)	Does receiving food aid influence the adoption of climate-adaptive agricultural practices? Evidence from Ethiopia and Malawi
StC (2020)	Analysis of Child-Sensitive Social Protection in Malawi
Sundqvist (2023)	Towards an adaptive social registry in Malawi
Sundqvist (2023)	Using a social registry to assess household social vulnerability to natural hazards in Malawi
Tariq (2018)	Malawi's Journey Towards Transformation: Lessons from its National ID Project
UNHCR (2021)	Inclusion of refugees in government social protection systems in Africa
UNICEF (2021)	Targeting for social protection in humanitarian and fragile contexts
UNICEF (2024)	Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme
UNICEF & Centre for Social Research of	Policy options to improve the educational impact of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer

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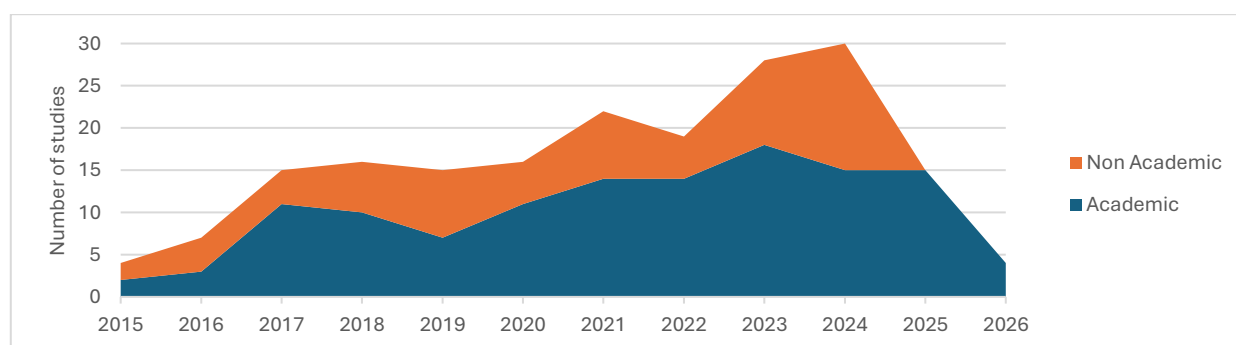
the University of Malawi (2020)	
UNICEF Innocenti (2020)	How Do Cash Transfers Affect Child Work and Schooling? Surprising evidence from Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia
USAID (2018)	Health, Resilience and Sustainable Poverty Escapes - A Synthesis
Verguet et al. (2023)	Investing in school systems: conceptualising returns on investment across the health, education and social protection sectors.
Wall et al. (2023)	The politics of agricultural policy and nutrition: A case study of Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme (AIP)
Walls et al. (2022)	How effectively might agricultural input subsidies improve nutrition? A case study of Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP)
WB (2022)	Malawi CCDR: Social Protection Sector Background Note
WB (2023)	Using Disaster Risk Financing to Build Adaptive Social Protection for Climate Shocks in Malawi
WB (2024)	Malawi, Home-Grown School Feeding Programme: Impact Evaluation
WB (2024)	Malawi's Path to Economic Stability: Investing on Adaptive Safety Nets
WFP Malawi (2023)	Home Grown School feeding in Malawi
World Bank (2023)	Impact Evaluation of the Social Support for Resilient Households Project
Zheng et al. (2022)	From Targeting to Transfer: Design of Allocation Rules in Cash Transfer Programs.
Zingwe, Banda & Manja (2023)	The effects of remittances on household food nutrition security in the context of multiple shocks in Malawi

Annex 2 Mapping the research landscape

Overview of existing research evidence

The desk review retained 191 studies out of the 600 based on their direct relevance with regards to the MSPRA (see Annex A). These span academic studies such as peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and University theses, but also non-academic such as governmental reports, development partner reports, and other grey literature. The following figures summarise the key structural features of this evidence base. There is a majority of peer-reviewed studies—more than 55% of the total evidence—compared to reports prepared by development partner (27%). The research volume has grown considerably over the review period, rising from 26 studies published between 2015 and 2017 to 69 in 2021-2023, with a further 49 published in 2024 until early 2026 (Figure 1). This growth reflects increasing interest in social protection evidence, particularly around cash transfer impacts and climate-social protection linkages.

Figure 1. Volume of relevant studies by year of publication and type of publication (n=191)



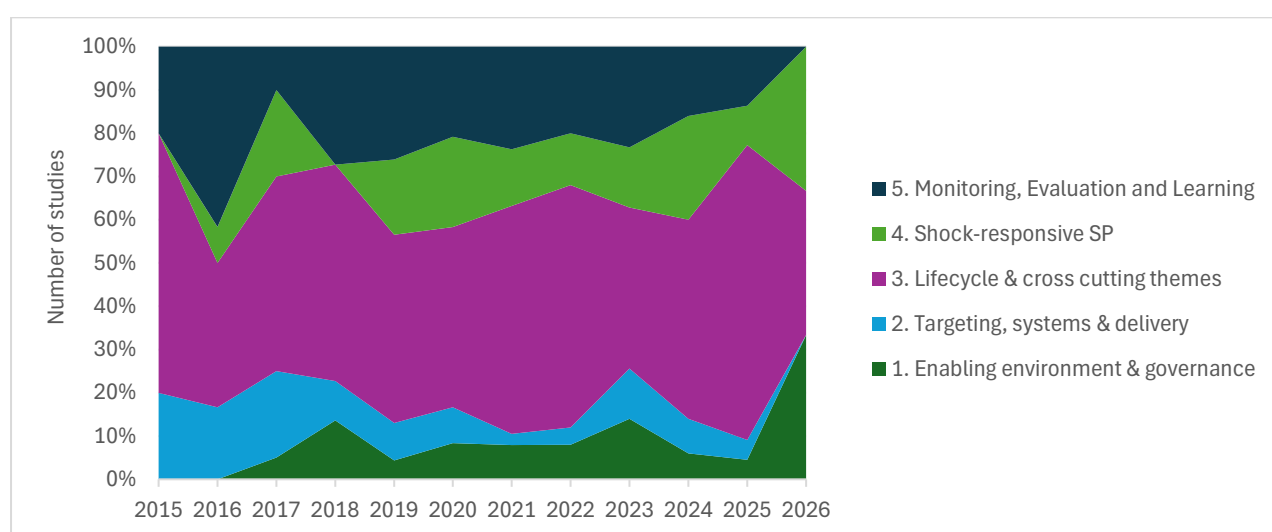
Note: Academic studies covers peer-reviewed articles, working papers and University theses, Non-Academic studies cover governmental reports, development partner reports, and other grey literature.

Following the thematic areas of the MSPRA Research areas described in Box 1, the thematic distribution of the relevant literature (see Figure 2) reveals a significant concentration of research around Area 3 (Lifecycle programmes & cross cutting themes), which features in 137 of the studies (72%). This reflects the depth of the

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evidence base on the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) and Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP), as well as cross-cutting issues such as food security, gender, health, and education. Area 5 (Monitoring, evidence and learning) accounts for 60 studies (31%) and has grown in prominence since 2020, suggesting an emerging recognition of the need for systematic evaluation and accountability within the sector, consistent with the MEL priorities outlined in the MNSPS 2023–28. Area 4 (Shock-responsive and climate-sensitive social protection) features in 44 studies (24%), while it is relatively growing in interest, its distribution remains uneven over time, with noticeable spikes around major climate events, indicating that research in this area remains largely reactive rather than proactive and sustained. Most strikingly, Areas 1 and 2—covering the enabling environment (governance, legislation, financing and coordination) and targeting, systems and delivery respectively—each feature in only around 24–25 studies (approximately 13% each), representing a persistent evidence gap across the entire review period. This imbalance is particularly significant given that the new National Social Protection Policy 2024–2029 and MNSPS explicitly prioritise strengthening the enabling environment and delivery systems as preconditions for a more effective and coherent social protection sector in Malawi, and points to where future research investment is most needed.

Figure 2. Volume of relevant studies by year of publication and thematic area (n=191)



Note: Data for 2026 only captures studies published up to March 2026 and therefore underrepresents that year's output.

Further observations from the desk review include:

- **Research concentration.** Most evidence is programme-specific rather than sector-wide. This is in line with stakeholder's perception of siloed implementation in the research area. The shift to lifecycle coordination requires evidence that spans multiple programmes and stages, which the current portfolio does not provide. Furthermore, the current literature focuses on SCTP and AIP impact on household consumption, food security, poverty reduction, and agricultural activities. Additionally, studies increasingly look into shock-responsive and shock-sensitive experiences related to scalability, financing, etc. However, significant gaps remain in cross-sectoral linkages and spillovers, social insurance, urban poverty, and disability-inclusive programming.
- **Gaps in geographic and population coverage.** Evidence from remote districts, urban poor populations, and specific vulnerable groups—including persons with disabilities, the elderly, refugees and migrants, as well as women—is scarce. The review found only two studies with disability as a primary focus, three for the elderly, one on refugees and migrants, and nine for women. The limited urban-specific social protection evidence, despite rising urban poverty rates, represents a notable gap, as was confirmed during stakeholder exchanges.
- **Limited government-academia linkages.** Studies are disproportionately led by international development partners and consultants rather than Malawian institutions. While Malawian academics do contribute meaningfully to the evidence base—primarily through peer-reviewed publications, often in collaboration with international partners—the contribution is rarely linked to policy advocacy. This has been confirmed during the interviews, with a few stakeholders sharing that collaboration between Malawian universities and government or donors tends to be ad hoc rather than institutionalised, and academics are frequently engaged only at validation stages rather than throughout the research process. Others also shared that the current research

landscape has been shaped by external interests and frameworks substantially.

Stakeholder Perceptions, Priorities and Gaps

A total of 18 individuals were interviewed across key stakeholder groups as shown in Table 1, with an additional 12 respondents reached through a structured survey. All respondents were asked to identify the most significant challenges, gaps and priorities in social protection research and implementation in Malawi.

Research challenges

Donor dependency emerged as the most frequently cited challenge, reflecting a sector where the flagship cash transfer programme is government-financed in only one of 28 districts, and where research commissioning is mostly driven externally. Political interference was also often raised, encompassing both the manipulation of beneficiary targeting and the reluctance to evaluate politically sensitive programmes such as AIP. Fragmentation and the lack of coordination across institutions, data systems and programme MIS were similarly highlighted by many stakeholders.

Other frequently mentioned challenges included insufficient domestic funding, limited data availability, and the research implications of the static nature of the MSR. Several stakeholders noted siloed implementation, consistent with the desk review finding that research tends to be programme-specific rather than cross-cutting. Short-term planning horizons, regulatory barriers and data silos were also identified. Several respondents flagged validation-only engagement, whereby researchers are brought in solely to endorse pre-formed conclusions rather than to inform them. Finally, ideological resistance—including the perception that social protection fosters dependency or laziness—was cited as a political barrier to the rigorous evaluation of certain programmes.

Research Priorities and Gaps

Sustainable financing was the most frequently mentioned research priority, reflecting the sector's near-total dependence on external funding and the absence of an evidence base to support the case for domestic investment. The lack of graduation

evidence and the political economy around social protection were also raised. The emphasis on graduation evidence reflects a recognised gap in understanding what works to move households out of ultra-poverty, and subsequently away from a dependence on social assistance, particularly for working-age adults. The political economy priority reflects respondents' view that the barriers to effective social protection are as much political as technical.

Further identified research priorities included impact evaluations across social protection interventions, the functioning of a dynamic social registry, cash-plus evidence, and the climate-social protection nexus. The prominence of the dynamic social registry reflects widespread recognition that the current static MSR is unable to respond to shocks or to the lifecycle transitions. Other research gaps and priorities raised by stakeholders are related to gender dynamics, youth employment, targeting accuracy and macro-economic effects. The findings of the desk review and stakeholders' perceptions are summarised in the box below.

Box 2. Identified evidence gaps

The following gaps were identified through cross-referencing the evidence base against the NSPP and MNSPS commitments. A clear convergence of high priority and low coverage research areas defines the most critical gaps the MSPRA must address.

These gaps form the basis for the research questions in Chapter 3.

- **Lifecycle-specific evidence:** There is almost no impact evidence disaggregated by lifecycle stage. The relative newness of the approach also means that the specific needs associated with each life stage have not yet been systematically documented. The MNSPS adopts lifecycle as its organising principle, yet baseline data on outcomes by age remains limited.
- **Graduation pathways:** Despite being a stated objective of the MNSPS, there is very limited evidence on what enables households to move sustainably out of dependence on social assistance, and on what happens to households after

Box 2. Identified evidence gaps

they exit programmes. This gap is reflected in the MSR, which as the main targeting tool lacks clear mechanisms to assess readiness for graduation and track households post graduation.

- **Social insurance:** The NSPP designates social insurance as part of Priority Area 5. Research on barriers, willingness to contribute, and viable design models, particularly to address the informal sector, in the Malawian context is essentially absent.
- **Urban social protection:** Poverty among the urban population has risen, yet, evidence on how social protection programmes reach and serve the urban poor and peri-urban households is very limited.
- **Cash-plus linkages:** The MNSPS identifies cash-plus as a strategic opportunity, but there are few studies (9) of such interventions in the relevant evidence base.
- **Minority groups:** Coverage of vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, refugees and the elderly in the social protection system remains poorly documented, as do their experience, the true extent of associated costs and adaptations needed in delivery systems.
- **Domestic financing:** The political economy of mobilising domestic financing resources for social protection and of reducing donor dependence, has not been systematically analysed.
- **Dynamic social registry:** The current MSR is static and unable to respond to shocks or capture lifecycle transitions. Evidence on the design, feasibility and governance of a dynamic registry that is interoperable with other national data systems—including the NID and civil registration—is lacking.
- **Political economy of social protection:** Targeted research that builds the evidence base on programme effectiveness and return on investment could serve as a powerful advocacy tool, helping to counter ideological resistance—

Box 2. Identified evidence gaps

including entrenched narratives around dependency and handouts—and to make the case for domestic financing in a context where political barriers and corruption risks continue to undermine both the scale and credibility of social protection.

Stakeholder mapping

The research landscape in Malawi's social protection sector involves a diverse set of actors. This section provides an overview of the key stakeholders, their roles, and areas of interest to inform future collaborations and to anchor the agenda in locally driven research. Stakeholders were mapped across five categories: government, UN/multilateral, bilateral donors, academia and research institutions, and CSOs/NGOs. The list is non-exhaustive, particularly concerning CSOs and NGOs.

A key finding of the KIs and literature review is that while Malawian academics contribute meaningfully to the social protection evidence base this contribution is largely disconnected from government research processes and policy cycles. Collaboration between universities and government tends to be ad hoc rather than institutionalised, and academics are frequently engaged only at validation stages rather than throughout the research process. Limited access to administrative and programme data, low domestic research funding, and high staff turnover further constrain the ability to leverage existing academic capacity. Building more systematic and equitable partnerships is therefore both a recognised gap and a significant opportunity.

Table 7. Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholder	Primary role in social protection research
Government	

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Stakeholder	Primary role in social protection research
MOF EP&D - PRSP Division	• Lead SP sector coordinator • Primary commissioner of SP research and host of MNSPS technical working groups • Responsible for policy, legislation and sector monitoring
NPC	• Oversees the NRA • Coordinates national research priorities aligned with Malawi 2063 and MIP-1 • Commissioner of strategic cross-sector research
NLGFC	• Oversees operational and developmental resources to local governments • Relevant to domestic SP financing and accountability at district level • Lead governmental agency to implement the SP Multi-Donor Trust Fund.
DoDMA	• Lead agency for disaster risk management and disaster response • Coordinates shock-responsive SP mechanisms (lean season response).
MoGCDSW	• Lead implementing ministry for SCTP and social welfare programmes including and community development and cash plus initiatives; • Implements scalable safety net and disburses cash during lean season response. • Commissioner of research • Responsible for gender mainstreaming and disability inclusion.
NSO	• Primary national data producer

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Stakeholder	Primary role in social protection research
	• Key partner for themes 2 and 5 • Executes collection, analysis and dissemination of national data, including the Integrated Household Survey, which is used to determine national poverty, ultra-poverty, child monetary and child multidimensional poverty.
DCs	• Front-line implementers of SP programmes (SCTP, PWP, AIP, school feeding) • Rollout community targeting, enrolment, case management and grievance redress.
Academia	
UNIMA	• Lead national university partner for locally driven SP research across social sciences, economics and public policy • Builds national research and analytical capacity through training and capacity development • Supports advanced data analysis and modelling • Contributes to MEL design, strengthening and implementation
LUANAR	• Leading agricultural university • Executor of applied research on food security, climate-smart agriculture and SP-agriculture linkages
Mwapata Institute for Agricultural Research	• Agricultural policy research institute • Executor of applied research on food systems and SP-agriculture linkages.

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Stakeholder	Primary role in social protection research
Malawi School of Government	• Specialises in public administration and governance • Research and training on SP institutional capacity and policy analysis.
Magomero Community Development college	• Agricultural and technical college • Offers certificate and diploma (from 2026) in Social Protection
MUST	• Science and technology research capacity
Donors and Development Partners	
UNICEF	• Major research commissioner and funder • Leads SP-GEAR technical working group with MOF EP&D/PRSP • Commissions and executes research, esp. on child-sensitive SP research
WB	• Major commissioner and funder • Commissions and executes research, esp. on SP systems, adaptive safety nets, MSR, social registry and SP financing.
WFP	• Implements food assistance and home-grown school feeding • Commissions and executes research, esp. on food security, school feeding and shock-responsive SP
EU Delegation	• Co-funder of SP-GEAR programme (with Embassy of Ireland) • Commissions research

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Stakeholder	Primary role in social protection research
Embassy of Ireland	- Co-funder of SP-GEAR programme (with EU Delegation) - Commissions research
GIZ	- Provides technical assistance on SP delivery systems and governance - Commissions and executes research, esp. on agriculture and nutrition, sustainable infrastructure, and social development
ILO	- UN agency with a mandate on labour, social security and social protection floors - Commissions and executes research, esp. on social security, pensions and labour market programmes
Save the Children	- Implements cash transfer and cash-plus programmes - Leads Household Economic Analysis (HEA) to assess household welfare, esp. food security - Commissions and executes research, especially on child-sensitive SP
FAO	- UN agency on food, agriculture and rural livelihoods - Commissions and executes research, especially on SP-agriculture linkages, resilience and food security.
Research Institutes	
IFPRI	- International research institute - Generates evidence, esp. on food security, agricultural markets and institutions
UNIMA CSR	- Research arm of UNIMA's Faculty of Science - Primary social science research and consulting institution - Provide capacity building workshops

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Stakeholder	Primary role in social protection research
Non-Governmental Organisations	
Give Directly	• Implements unconditional cash transfers including climate-related loss and damage payments • Generates evidence, esp. on cash transfer impacts
Women and Girls Disability Rights	• Advocates for disability-inclusive SP and rights of women and girls with disabilities • SP research user and disseminator/advocator
Civil Society Organisations	
CSSPN	• National CSO network advocating for accountable and inclusive SP; • SP research user and disseminator/advocator
SIAM	• Disability rights organisation • Advocates for persons with disabilities in SP • SP research user and disseminator/advocator

Note: This is a non-exhaustive list solely based on the involvement in the development of this MSPRA.

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European Union



Ireland

