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MALAWI: Markets and Minimum Expenditure Basket Monitoring Bulletin

August 2025

Key Highlights



The amount required for a typical household to meet the monthly survival needs, as monitored by the WFP Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), rose to MWK 237,500 in August 2025. This represents a five percent rise from MWK 225,700 in July.



Maize grain price continue to rise, averaging MWK 1,319 per kg in the third week of August 2025. The prices of maize have increased since June, exerting exceptional pressure on households' ability to access their food through the market.



The price of beans averaged MWK 6,575 per kg, increasing by 7 percent since July. The price of cowpeas also rose by 7 percent during the same period to MWK 3,082 per kg. On the other hand, the price of pigeon peas dropped by 8 percent to MWK 2,217 per kg amidst a peak in the harvest period for this commodity.

Monitored by WFP Malawi since April 2020, the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) represents the minimum cost required to meet basic food and non-food needs through market purchases over a period of a month. The food commodities used in calculating the expenditure are those that make up a traditional rural and urban diet. The urban non-food basket includes other items such as the cost of electricity and rent that are excluded in the rural calculation.

Market prices of the selected commodities are collected by WFP from traders across the country as a proxy for households' actual expenditure. Refer to *Box 1* for more details on the construction of the SMEB.

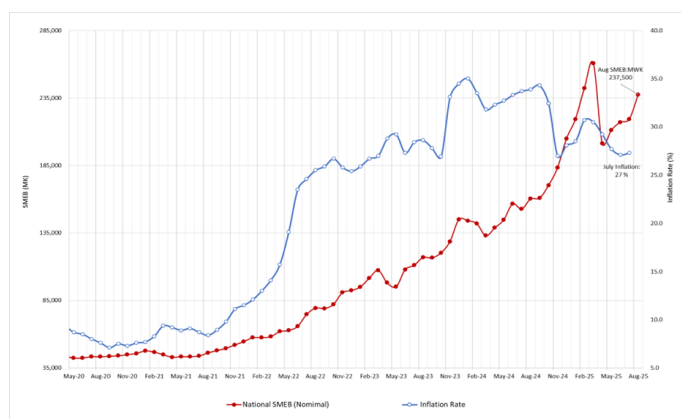
The amount required for a typical household to meet the monthly survival needs rose to MWK 237,500 in August 2025. On a month-to-month basis, this represents a 5 percent increase from MWK 225,700 in July. Rising prices of maize grain, fish and eggs largely pushed up the basket cost. Currently, the food basket costs MWK 210,500 per month, increasing by 6 percent since July, while the non-food basket fell by 3 percent to MWK 27,000 (Table 1). Households' expenditure trend shows that the SMEB cost has constantly risen since April 2020 (Figure 1). Over a period of a year, the SMEB cost has jumped by 48 percent from MWK 160,300 last August.

Table 1. Cost of SMEB by location.

Area of Residence	Total/Average SMEB		Food Basket		Non-Food Basket	
	Estimated cost (in MWK) this month	% change since last month	Estimated cost (in MWK) this month	% change since last month	Estimated cost (in MWK) this month	% change since last month
Urban Areas	281,500	▼-5	208,700	▼-1	72,700	▼-15
Rural North	221,100	▲+1	197,200	▼-1	24,000	▼-23
Rural Centre	232,700	▲+4	208,600	▲+7	24,100	▼-14
Rural South	240,300	▲+5	215,000	▲+7	25,300	▼-8
National	237,500	▲+5	210,500	▲+6	27,000	▼-3

The SMEB costs more in the urban cities relative to rural areas. While the higher cost of the basket in the cities is largely attributed to the inclusion of housing rent and cost of electricity, which are exempted in the calculation of the rural baskets (see Box 1 below), prices of basic goods are also generally high in the urban cities. On average, the SMEB costed MWK 281,500 in the urban cities of Lilongwe, Blantyre, Zomba and Mzuzu. This compares to MWK 240,300 in the rural South, MWK 232,700 in the rural Centre, and MWK 221,100 in the rural North (Table 1 and Figure 2). Although both food and non-food expenditure in the rural areas moved up, households in the rural South faced a larger increase in their expenditure. On the contrary, households' expenditure decelerated in the urban cities as prices of most of the food and non-food commodities dipped.

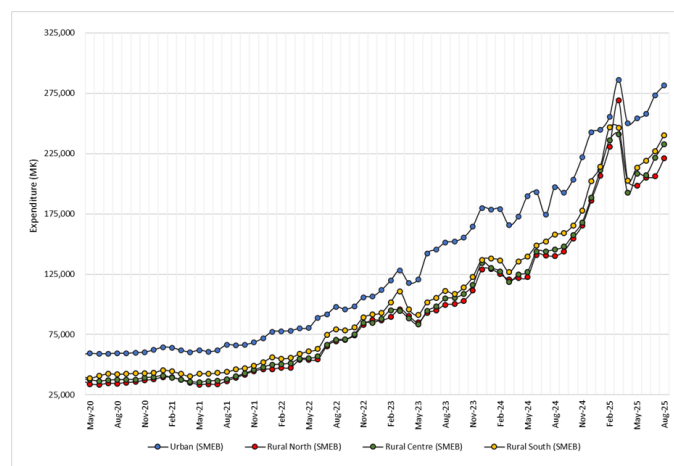
Figure 1. Trends of the SMEBs and inflation rate since 2020



The latest inflation figures for July 2025 show a worsening situation. The year-on-year overall inflation rate for July was 27.3 percent, an increase from

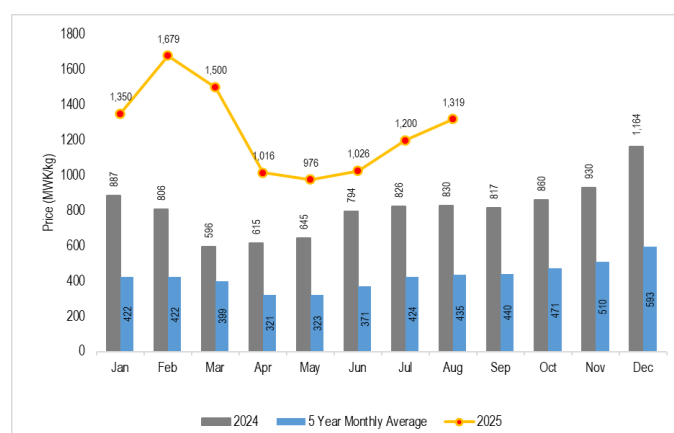
27.1 percent in June. Food inflation rose to 32.4 percent in July from 31.6 percent in June. However, the non-food inflation dropped to 19.3 percent in July from 20.1 percent in June. This uptick reflects an acceleration in food prices after the conclusion of the harvest season. **The high rate of inflation continues to significantly erode households' ability to access food from the markets.**

Figure 2. Average monthly SMEBs trends by area of residence, since April 2020



Maize grain prices continue to rise, averaging MWK 1,319 per kg (equivalent to MWK 66,000 per 50 kg bag) in the third week of August 2025. This price level was previously observed only around the peak of the lean season in past years (Figure 3). In the current consumption year, prices have been on the rise since May, following the end of the harvesting period and are expected to continue rising as we approach the lean season. This forces households to compromise on their spending on other essential non-food needs such as health care and education.

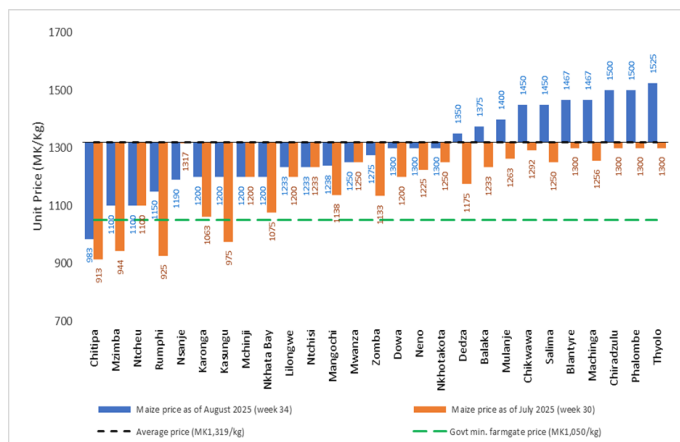
Figure 3. Price of maize as of August 2025 (week 34) and year ended 2024 compared to the five-year average.



The grain price continues to trend at its highest in Southern Region. In this region, maize prices averaged MWK 1,503 per kg compared to MWK 1,370 per kg in the Central Region and MWK 1,238 per kg in the Northern

Region. Given the poor grain production this year, prices are expected to continue rising into the lean season, projected to average around MWK 2,000 per kg at the peak of the lean season between January and February 2026.

Figure 4. Average maize grain prices by district



Prices of maize surpassed the national average price in 10 of the 28 monitored districts (Figure 4). Thyolo recorded the highest average price of MWK 1,525 per kg, while the lowest district average price of MWK 983 per kg was observed in Chitipa. The Government set the minimum farmgate price for maize at MWK 1,050 per kg in the current consumption year.

The prices of beans and cowpeas rose over the past month as that of pigeon peas fell. In the third week of August, the price of beans averaged MWK 6,575 per kg, increasing by 7 percent since July. By regions, beans were selling at an average price of MWK 6,714 per kg in the South; MWK 6,771 per kg in the Centre; and MWK 5,654 per kg in the North. The price of cowpeas also rose by 7 percent during the same period to MWK 3,082 percent. On the other hand, the price of pigeon peas dropped by 8 percent to MWK 2,217 per kg amidst a peak in the harvest period for this commodity (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Figure 5. Average monthly price trends for pulses (Jan 2023 to Jun 2025)

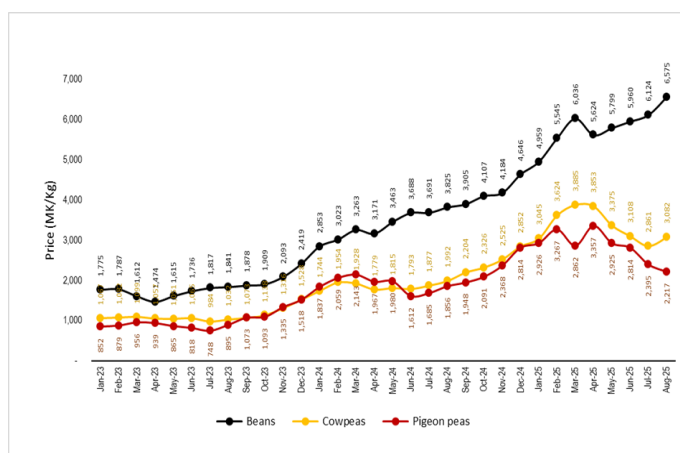
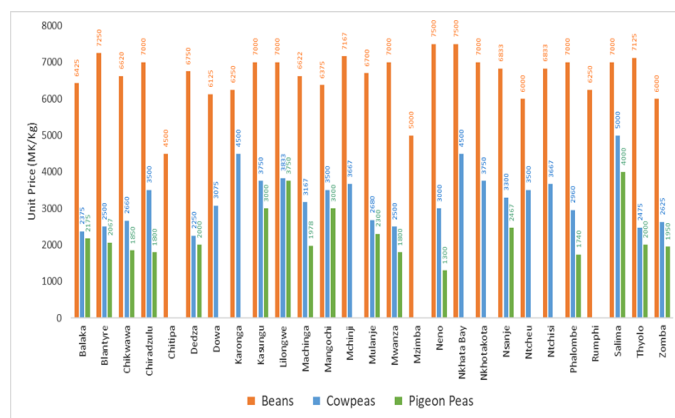


Figure 6. Average pulse prices by district



Construction of the SMEB and Assumptions

The minimum expenditure basket (MEB) looks at the needs that are covered—partially or fully—through the market, setting a monetary threshold. While the MEB is defined as what a household requires to meet their essential needs, on a regular or seasonal basis, and its average cost, the survival MEB (SMEB) is the absolute minimum amount required to maintain existence and cover lifesaving needs. However, the concepts of an SMEB and MEB are sometimes used interchangeably.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) Malawi Country Office constructed its SMEB in April 2020 in line with a rights-based approach, based on previously assessed needs, by collecting expenditure data. The SMEB formed part of the WFP's regular monitoring to better understand the typical expenditure by looking at food and essential non-food items. This ensured that elements of the household's needs/rights were incorporated in the analysis. The food commodities selected to calculate the SMEB are those that make up a typical rural and urban survival diet. These include cereals (maize), roots and tubers (cassava), pulses (beans), oil, vegetables, fish, eggs, sugar and salt.

Using the Nutval application, WFP determined a ration that meets the basic energy requirement of 2,100 kilocalories per person per day. Of the total energy, 12 percent is provided from proteins (requirement range is 10-12 percent) and 20 percent is from fats (requirement is at least 17 percent). Approximately 62 percent of the total food basket is made up of carbohydrates. While WFP strives to promote enhanced dietary diversity, historical data collected in late 2019 and 2020 on the expenditure of severely food insecure households residing in rural areas indicates that households are still spending most of their income on cereals, specifically maize. The food component of the SMEB excludes both meat and milk because these products are rarely consumed, especially by those classified as extremely vulnerable.

Essential non-food commodities included when constructing the SMEB basket are firewood (or charcoal for urban households), matches, electricity bills (for the urban households), electricity charging costs (for mobile phones and lighting). The survival basket also excludes education costs (notably because public primary education is free), health service fees and basic medicines, and agricultural input costs.

Annex 1: Calculation of the SMEB for the urban areas and rural Northern, Central and Southern Regions

ITEM	QUANTITY/ PERSON/MONTH	UNIT OF MEASURE	CONVERSION FACTOR	UNIT COST				COST/PERSON/MONTH				SMBE VALUE IN AUGUST 2025 (WEEK 34)				SMBE VALUE IN JULY 2025 (WEEK 30)				
				URBAN AREAS	(RURAL)	CENTRE (RURAL)	SOUTH (RURAL)	URBAN AREAS	(RURAL)	NORTH (RURAL)	CENTRE (RURAL)	SOUTH (RURAL)	URBAN AREAS	(RURAL)	NORTH (RURAL)	CENTRE (RURAL)	SOUTH (RURAL)	URBAN AREAS	(RURAL)	NORTH (RURAL)
FOOD ITEMS																				
Maize	12.6	Kg	1.0	1,238	1,108	1,286	1,388	15,599	13,961	16,204	17,489	70,195	62,824	72,916	78,700	70,875	56,133	66,793	71,726	
Beans	1.5	Kg	1.0	6,563	5,771	6,750	6,684	9,845	8,657	10,125	10,026	44,300	38,954	45,563	45,117	47,250	38,394	42,444	43,889	
Cooking Oil	0.75	Lt	1.0	7,750	7,908	7,391	7,314	5,813	5,931	5,543	5,486	26,156	26,690	24,945	24,685	27,000	29,811	25,893	25,785	
Cassava	0.6	Kg	1.0	2,600	2,500	2,540	2,979	1,560	1,500	1,524	1,787	7,020	6,750	6,858	8,043	7,741	5,978	7,047	7,106	
Salt (iodized)	0.15	Kg	1.0	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	225	225	225	225	1,013	1,013	1,013	1,013	1,013	1,013	1,013	1,013	
Vegetables	3	Kg	6.7	209	296	292	301	627	888	876	903	2,822	3,996	3,942	4,064	4,280	3,659	4,064	4,064	
Eggs	0.15	Kg	20.0	10,260	10,000	10,040	10,140	1,539	1,500	1,506	1,521	6,926	6,750	6,777	6,845	6,750	6,750	6,494	6,642	
Fish (dried)	0.6	Kg	8.0	15,000	14,912	13,640	13,520	9,000	8,947	8,184	8,112	40,500	40,262	36,828	36,504	36,007	36,007	31,061	30,154	
Sugar	0.6	Kg	1.0	3,625	3,683	3,625	3,718	2,175	2,210	2,175	2,231	9,788	9,944	9,788	10,039	10,260	10,214	10,363	10,319	
SUB-TOTAL				46,382	43,818	46,362	47,780	208,718	197,182	208,628	215,008	211,175	187,958	195,170	200,696					
NON-FOOD ITEMS																				
Charcoal/ firewood	50	Kg	1.0	750	267	267	277	37,500	13,350	13,350	13,850	37,500	13,350	13,350	13,850	50,000	21,350	17,450	16,500	
Matches	4	Boxes	1.0	200	200	200	200	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	
Milling cost	4	Times	1.0	249	243	243	450	995	970	970	1,802	995	970	970	1,802	1,046	995	945	1,688	
Laundry soap	2	Pcs	1.0	1,025	1,008	1,030	1,007	2,050	2,016	2,060	2,014	2,050	2,016	2,060	2,014	2,000	1,966	1,944	1,948	
Body soap	2	Pcs	1.0	3,450	3,408	3,441	3,425	6,900	6,816	6,882	6,850	6,900	6,816	6,882	6,850	6,734	6,054	6,900	6,512	
Electricity	1	Month	1.0	4,500	-	-	-	4,500	-	-	-	4,500	-	-	-	4,500	-	-	-	
House rent	1	Month	1.0	20,000	-	-	-	20,000	-	-	-	20,000	-	-	-	20,000	-	-	-	
SUB-TOTAL				72,745	23,952	24,062	25,316	72,745	23,952	24,062	25,316	72,745	23,952	24,062	25,316	85,080	31,165	28,039	27,448	
TOTAL MEB				119,127	67,771	70,424	73,095	281,464	221,135	232,691	240,324	296,255	219,124	223,209	228,145					



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