

A Budget for the people? Citizens' priorities and Malawi's budget decision

summary

This brief presents the priorities that Malawian citizens identified for the new government to address, as captured in a national pre-election survey of 2400 adult Malawians conducted by the Institute of Public Opinion and Research (IPOR) in August 2025.

Food shortages (29%) and economic management (29%) emerged as the top priorities for the government to address following the 2025 general elections. These issues have consistently ranked as major concerns over the past decade, with food insecurity remaining the foremost issue.

Priorities differ systematically among various population groups: rural residents, women, older adults (36 years and above), and less-educated citizens emphasize food security and agriculture, whereas urban residents, youth, men, and more educated Malawians prioritize economic management, taxation, and employment-related issues.

The persistent and ongoing concern regarding food shortages highlights the country's struggle to meet the basic needs of its citizens. This raises questions about the effectiveness of long-standing investments in agricultural subsidies and underscores the need for alternative solutions, such as investing in large-scale farms. The diverse priorities across different regions and social groups demonstrate the risks associated with a one-size-fits-all approach to the allocation of government resources or development projects, which could lead to inefficiencies in resource allocation.

Introduction

Agenda setting is a crucial function of governments. Given that resources are always limited, governments must establish priorities before implementing policy actions (Najib Ben Saad & Logan, 2024). Government agendas are often shaped by political leaders, lobbyists, and external actors, such as international financial institutions or global patrons. Many of these stakeholders pursue their own interests rather than those of ordinary citizens. While some claim to represent the voices of the poor, the extent of their representation is often

questionable. For instance, Members of Parliament frequently assert they represent their constituents, yet they seldom consult them. Similarly, some civil society organizations (CSOs) argue they understand ordinary citizens' needs, but their views may not align with actual citizen desires.

Understanding citizens' priorities is essential for ensuring that public decisions reflect the needs, concerns, and aspirations of the people they are meant to serve. When governments and elected officials consider citizens' priorities, policies and budgets are more likely to tackle pressing issues such as livelihoods, service delivery, and social protection, rather than being driven by elite interests or assumptions. In contexts like Malawi, where resources are limited and trade-offs are inevitable, grasping citizens' priorities helps policymakers make transparent and credible choices, reduce public dissatisfaction, and strengthen confidence in democratic institutions.

Although consulting all Malawians is impractical, nationally representative surveys provide a valuable way to gather the opinions of ordinary citizens through representative samples.

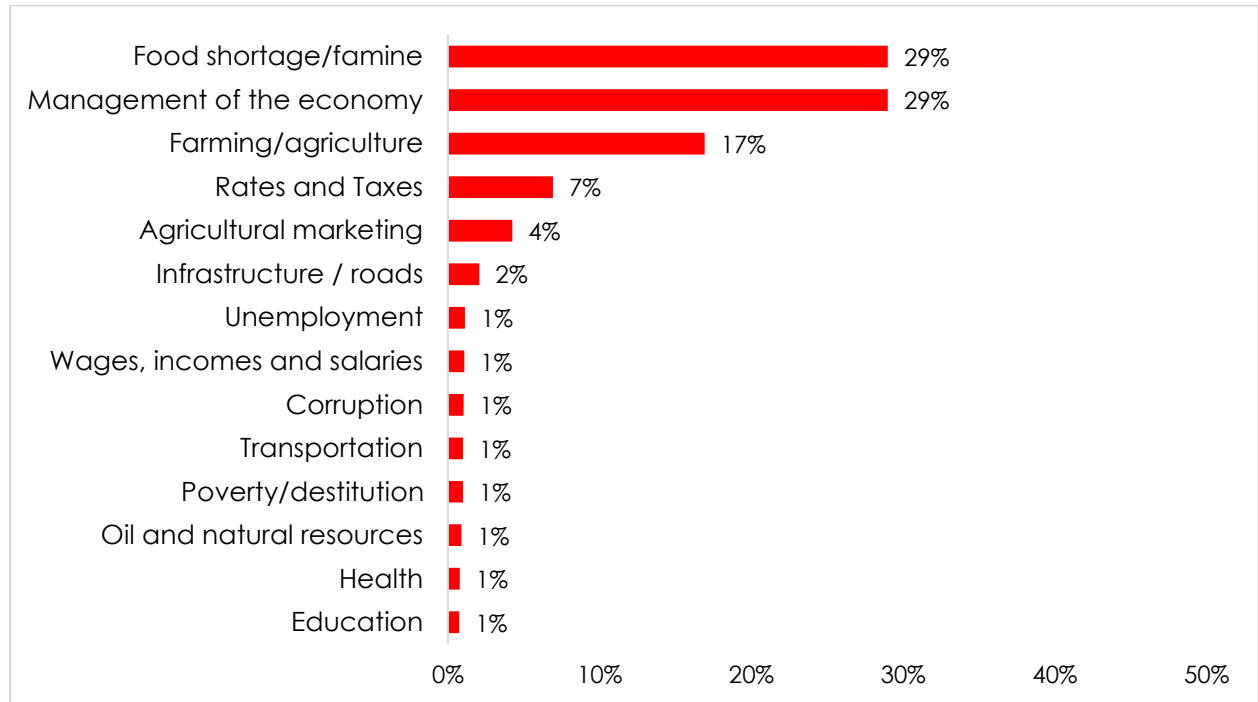
This brief presents the priorities that Malawian citizens identified for the new government to address, as captured in a national pre-election survey conducted by the Institute of Public Opinion and Research (IPOR) in August 2025.

Main findings

Malawians identified food shortages (29%) and economic management (29%) as the two top priorities for the government to address following the 2025 general elections. Other key concerns included agriculture (17%) and taxes and rates (7%) (Figure 1).

These findings highlight Malawi's ongoing struggle to meet its citizens' basic needs. Economic mismanagement, marked by high commodity prices, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and unreliable fuel supplies, remain significant challenges.

Figure 1: Popular priorities for government to address after the elections (August 2025)

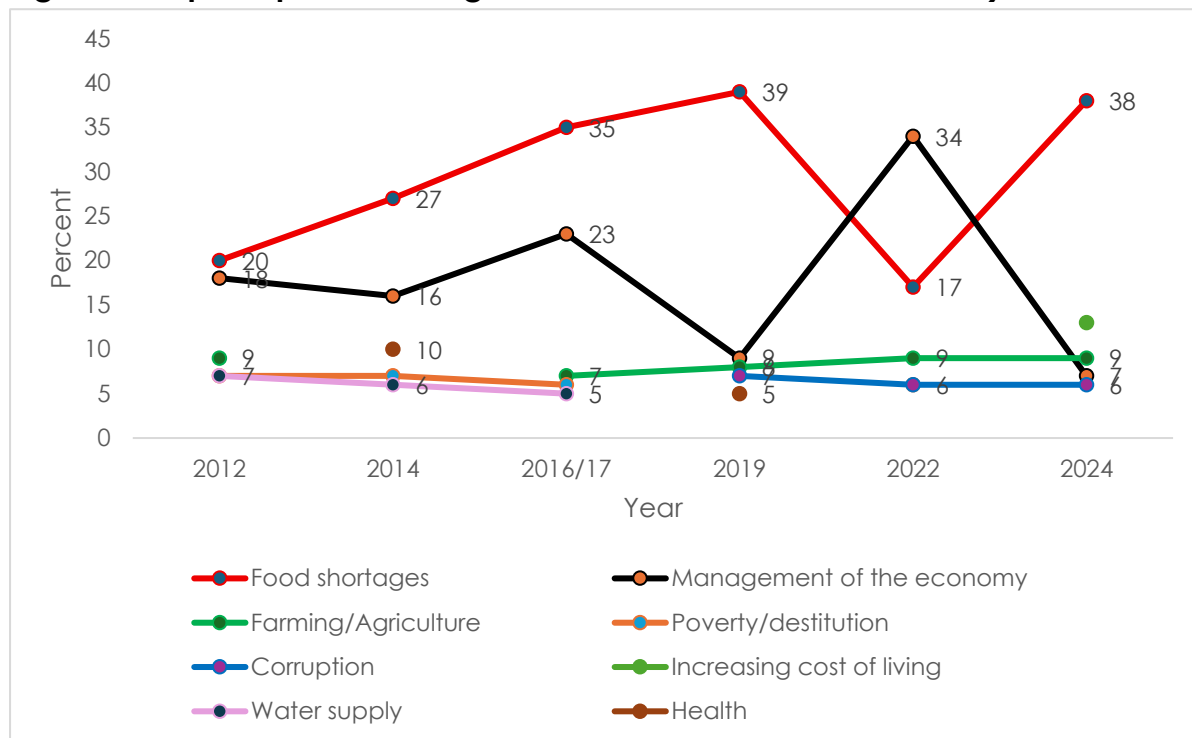


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing this country that the government should address after the 2025 elections? If respondent offers more than one answer options, ask "Which of these is the most important?"*

At the lower end of the spectrum, issues like infrastructure such as roads (2%), corruption (1%), unemployment (1%), education (1%), and health are seen as less urgent. However, this does not diminish their importance; rather, they are overshadowed by the pressing need to address food insecurity.

Looking at Afrobarometer survey data, which also asks a similar question, we can see the same pattern: consistently over time, the top five priorities have been: food shortages, management of the economy, farming and agriculture, poverty and destitution. Occasionally, health and water supply have also been among the top priority issues that ordinary Malawians expect government to address. In recent Afrobarometer surveys, corruption has also emerged among the top five priority issues that Malawians want the government to address (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Popular priorities for government to address 2012-2024)

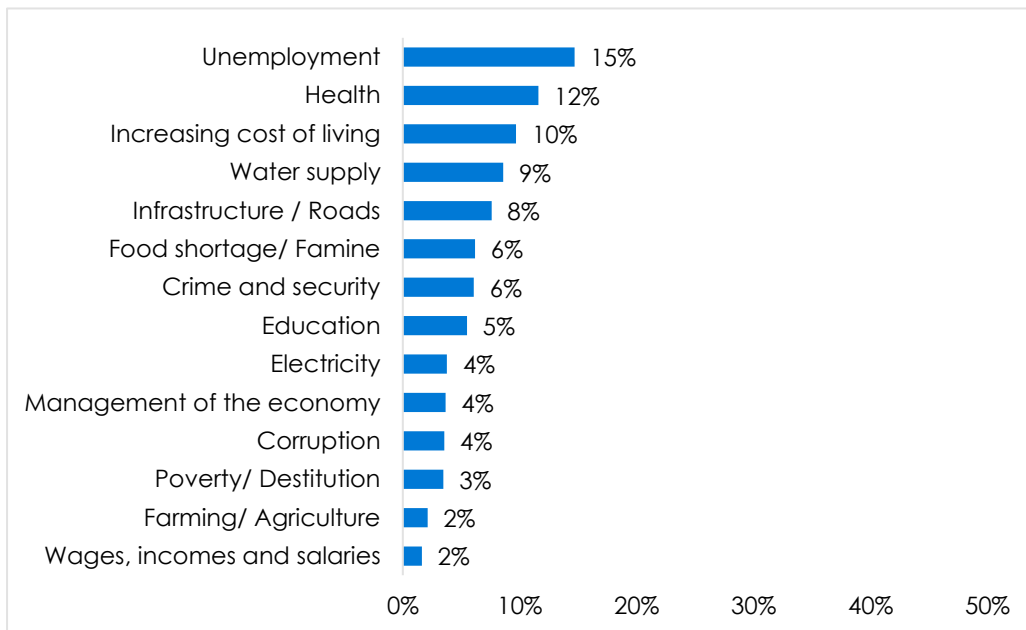


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing this country that the government should address after the 2025 elections? If respondent offers more than one answer options, ask "Which of these is the most important?"* **Source,** Afrobarometer.

With the exception of 2022 when management of the economy was the number one issue, food shortages has been consistently the top priority issue that Malawians wanted their government to address for the past decade. The emphasis on food security aligns with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which posits that basic physiological requirements, such as food, must be met before addressing higher-order needs. Consequently, the government should prioritize policies that tackle fundamental necessities like food security to lay the foundation for addressing other development challenges.

In comparison to an average of 38 African countries surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2024/2025, the findings presented in Figure 3 indicate that food shortages or famine rank as the sixth most pressing issue for a typical African government to address. Unemployment is identified as the most critical problem, followed by challenges related to health and the rising cost of living.

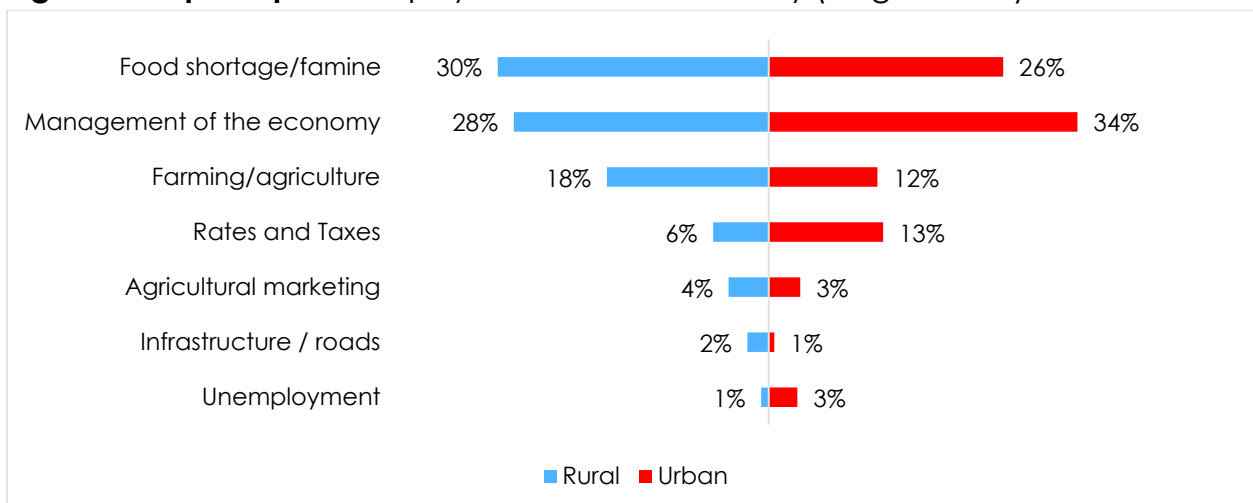
Figure 3: Popular priorities | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? [Do not read options. Code from responses. Accept up to three answers. If respondent offers more than three options, ask "Which three of these are the most important?" If respondent offers one or two answers, ask "Anything else?"]* **we analyzed first responses only**

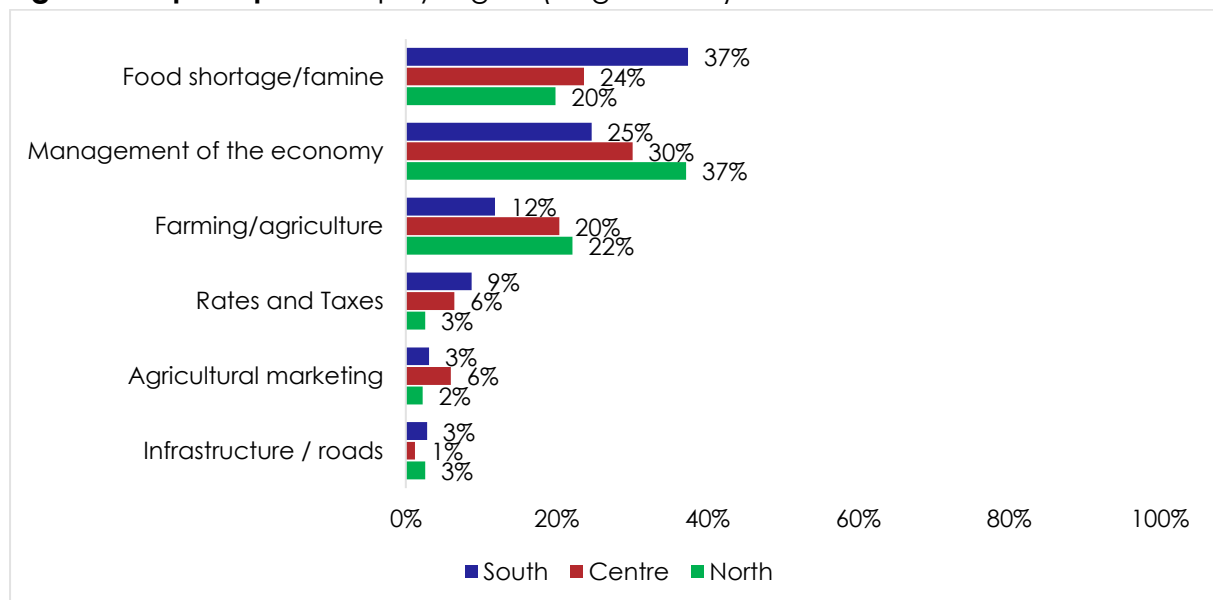
Analysis of the 2025 IPOR survey data by location reveals distinct priorities: urban residents focus on economic management, while rural residents prioritize food security and agriculture. Specifically, 30% of rural residents want government to prioritize food security compared to 26% of urban residents. On the other hand, a plurality of urban residents (34%) want the government to prioritize economic management compared to 28% of rural residents (Figure 4). Additionally, 18% of rural residents prioritize agriculture, compared to 12% of urban residents.

Figure 4: Popular priorities | by urban-rural residency (August 2025)



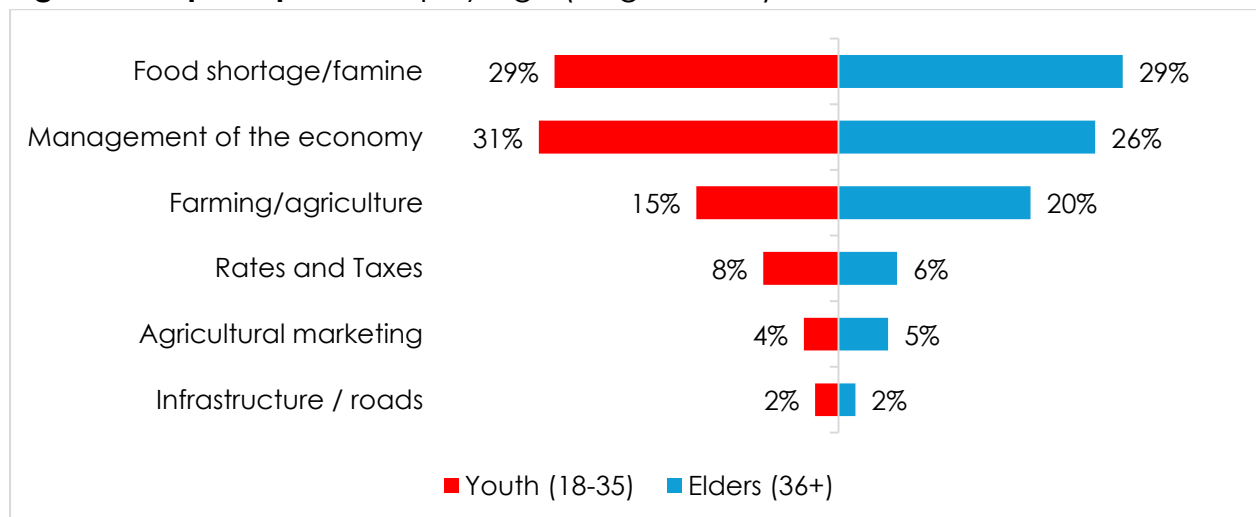
Regional disparities are evident in citizen priorities (Figure 5). In the southern region, 37% of residents prioritize food shortages, compared to 24% in the central region and only 20% in the northern region. This suggests that overall, the Southern region is the most food insecure, followed by the Central and Northern regions in that order primarily due to its heightened vulnerability to extreme weather events and underlying structural issues such as land scarcity, poor soil fertility, and high population density (Banda et al., 2025). Conversely, managing the economy is a higher priority for Northern residents, with 37% emphasizing this issue, followed by 30% in the Central region, while only 25% of Southern residents consider it important. Additionally, both Northern (22%) and Central region (20%) residents urge the government to address agricultural and farming issues urgently, in contrast to just 12% of Southern residents. On the other hand, Southern region residents show greater concern for tax issues compared to their Northern counterparts.

Figure 5: Popular priorities | by region (August 2025)



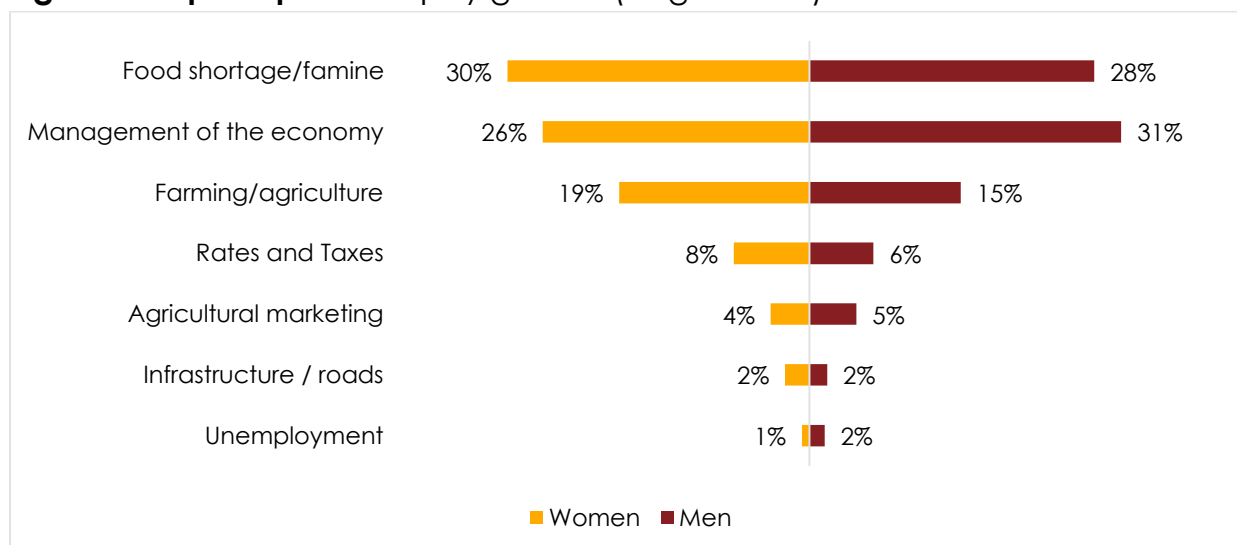
Younger Malawians, who make up a larger proportion of the country's population, focus more on economic management, whereas older generations prioritize agriculture (Figure 6). 31% of youth prioritize economic management compared to 26% of older adults. While 20% of elders prioritize agriculture compared to 15% of youth. The fact that the youth want government to prioritize management of the economy reflects a desire for a robust economy that creates jobs for the youth.

Figure 6: Popular priorities | by age (August 2025)



The needs of men and women are largely similar, though some narrow gender disparities exist. More men (31%) prioritize economic management than women (26%). In contrast, women (19%) place a higher priority on agriculture compared to men (15%) (Figure 7). Importantly, both genders equally identify food shortages as a critical issue that requires urgent government attention.

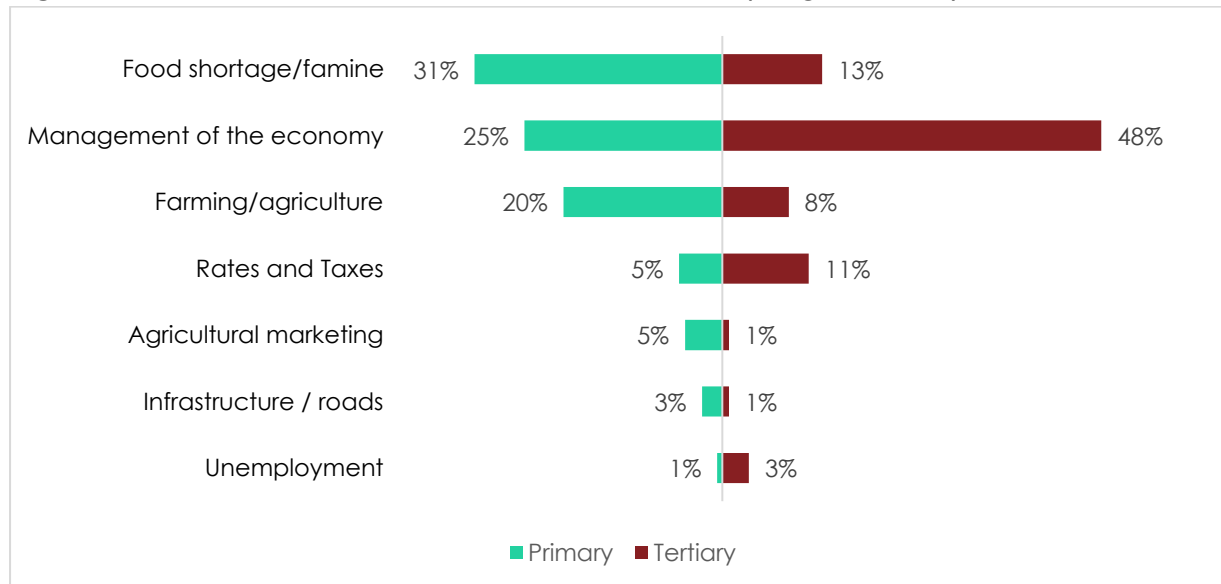
Figure 7: Popular priorities | by gender (August 2025)



Priorities vary based on levels of education. Individuals with low education levels (primary school or less) tend to prioritize food and agricultural issues, while those with higher education (secondary and above) focus on economic management, taxes, and unemployment (Figure 8). For instance, 31% of adult Malawians with primary education want the government to address food shortages, compared to only 13% of those with tertiary education. Additionally, 20% of individuals with primary education prioritize agricultural issues, whereas only 8% of those with tertiary education share this concern. Conversely, 48% of adults with tertiary education prioritize addressing economic problems,

compared to 25% of those with primary education. Furthermore, 11% of individuals with tertiary education advocate for lower taxes, in contrast to 5% of those with primary education.

Figure 8: Popular priorities | by education level (August, 2025)



Conclusion

This brief highlights the priorities of ordinary Malawians. Although pre-budget consultations are formally conducted, they often exclude the voices of many citizens and depend on intermediaries who may not accurately represent their needs. Evidence from the IPOR pre-election survey indicates that Malawians overwhelmingly prioritize food security, economic management, and agriculture, emphasizing the urgency of addressing basic needs amid ongoing economic challenges.

It is interesting, however, to note that despite consistent investment in agricultural subsidies, the challenge of food security remains a top priority among Malawians. While government can use this as an indicator that they are indeed prioritizing a top citizen need, the persistence of the problem suggests that the solution that has been adopted over time is failing to address this particular need. Government insistence on agricultural subsidies to address food shortage could thus be labelled a wrong solution for a genuine problem.

Malawi has long subsidized smallholder subsistence farming, particularly maize production, but these efforts have failed to meet the country's food needs. Despite subsidies consuming nearly half of the agricultural budget, productivity remains consistently low, leaving millions of Malawians reliant on food assistance each year (African Development Bank, United Nations, & World Bank Group. 2025). This situation indicates a structural issue rather than a temporary setback. To sustainably enhance food security and improve rural livelihoods, a

fundamental shift away from subsistence-oriented farming is necessary. This highlights the need to move from input subsidies to the commercialization of agriculture. By reallocating public resources toward agricultural research and development, strengthening extension services, restoring declining soil health, and increasing access to legume seeds, Malawi can boost productivity, diversify production, and reduce its chronic dependence on food aid (ibid).

Citizens' priorities differ systematically based on location, region, age, gender, and education level. This variation reveals that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to allocating development projects risks overlooking important differences among population groups, leading to inefficiencies in resource allocation. These findings underscore the necessity of grounding budget decisions and project allocations in empirical evidence directly sourced from citizens. For Parliamentarians, who have the constitutional authority to debate and approve the national budget, understanding these priorities is crucial for ensuring that public resources are allocated in ways that are responsive, equitable, and politically legitimate.

Integrating citizens' voices more systematically into the budget process can enhance the effectiveness of public spending. A budget that reflects citizens' priorities is more likely to tackle Malawi's most pressing development challenges.

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