

# Amid growing food insecurity, Malawians favour alternatives to Affordable Inputs Programme

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 946 | Witness Tapani Alfonso and Maxton Tsoka**

## Summary

The agriculture sector is central to the Malawian economy, accounting for 27% of gross domestic product and 80% of export earnings and employing 60% of the workforce (Benson, De Weerd, Duchoslav, & Masanjala, 2023). However, persistent problems with low agricultural productivity, food insecurity, hunger, and poor nutritional outcomes have kept the focus of the Malawian government and other stakeholders on the issue of food and nutrition (Walls et al., 2023).

One of the reasons frequently cited for low agricultural productivity is the inability of smallholder farmers to access productivity-enhancing farm inputs (Nyirenda et al., 2021). Consequently, successive governments have implemented agricultural-input subsidy programmes. The current Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP) was introduced in the 2020/2021 agricultural season, replacing the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (Nyirenda et al., 2021).

However, the effectiveness of AIP and its predecessor programmes has been a contested topic among practitioners and scholars. Some argue that despite its prominence in the country's agricultural policy and national budget – 110 billion Kwacha (\$63 Million) in the most recent budget – most Malawian farmers still fail to meet their household food demand, and millions depend on food assistance (Duchoslav & De Weerd, 2023).

Last March, government declared a state of emergency in the 23 districts in Malawi as it projected that most of the citizens will face hunger due to the impact of the drought and cyclones which destroyed crops in most parts of the country during the last farming season. In his national address in November, President Lazarus Chakwera said over 790 000 hectares of maize had been affected by the disaster representing over 44% of national crop area and would render 5.7 million Malawians food insecure from October 2024 to March 2025. He also hinted that in order to meet this food demand, government will need close to 350 billion Kwacha (close to US\$200 million) off-budget resources to save so many of our citizens from the looming threat of starvation (Government of Malawi, 2024).

Some Malawians see the AIP as a political token that strains the country's economy without meeting the goal of achieving food security, and therefore think it should be abolished (Nation Online, 2023; Zgambo, 2025). On the other hand, the government defends it as an honest and effective way of helping poor farmers to survive (Maulidi, 2024).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that a growing majority of Malawians are suffering food shortages and that food insecurity far outranks all other problems that citizens say their government must address.

Respondents think that the AIP mostly benefits agriculture-related businesses or public officials rather than poor farmers. And while most oppose abolishing the programme

altogether, overwhelming majorities would favour providing loans through farmers' clubs or giving farmers cash to buy their own inputs.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in August 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

## Key findings

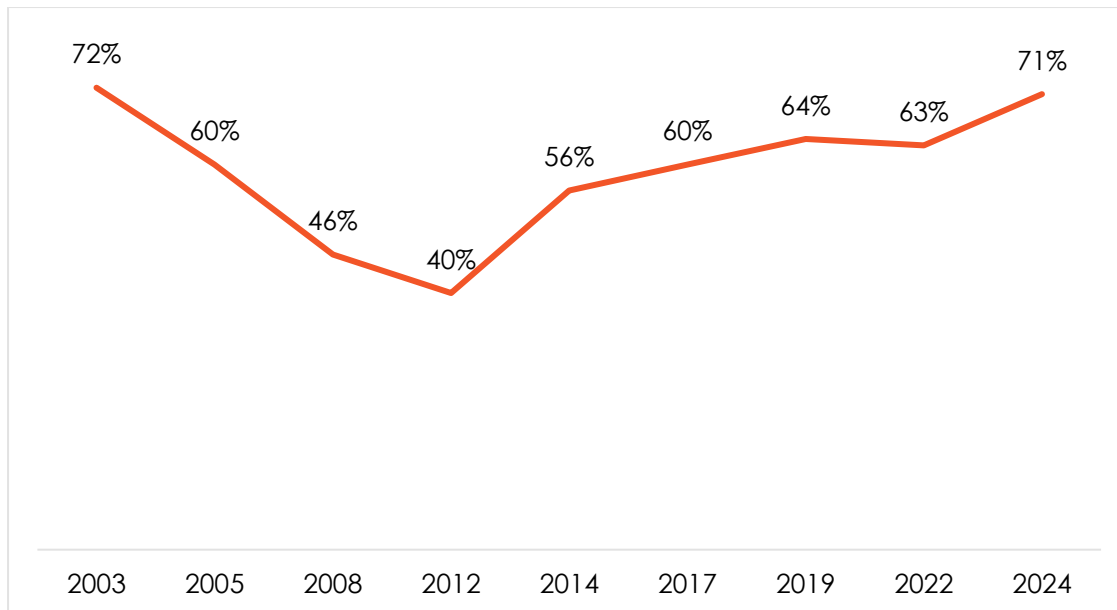
- Seven in 10 Malawians (71%) say they or a family member went without enough food "several times," "many times," or "always" during the previous year, a 31-percentage-point increase since 2012.
- Food insecurity ranks as by far the most important problem that Malawians say their government must address, cited by 58% of respondents as one of their top three priorities, followed by the related problems of agriculture (28%) and the increasing cost of living (28%).
- Seven in 10 Malawians (71%) say the Agricultural Inputs Programme for farmers favours particular people, parties, or interests.
- Only two in 10 citizens (22%) think that poor farmers are the primary beneficiaries of the AIP. Most think the programme mainly benefits agro-related businesses (38%), politicians (16%), government officials (13%), or traditional leaders (8%).
- Even so, almost two-thirds (63%) of Malawians oppose the idea of abolishing the AIP.
- Regarding alternatives to the AIP, nine out of 10 Malawians (89%) support the idea of providing inputs loans through farmers' clubs, and more than three-fourths (78%) endorse giving poor farmers cash to allow them to buy inputs themselves.

## Food situation in Malawi

Despite the government's efforts, food insecurity is a huge problem in both urban and rural areas. The government's declaration of a state of emergency is supported by Afrobarometer survey results: Fully seven in 10 Malawians say they or a family member went without enough food "several times," "many times," or "always" during the previous year, an increase of 8 percentage points since 2022 and of 31 point since 2012 (Figure 1). An additional 11% say they experienced food shortages "just once or twice."

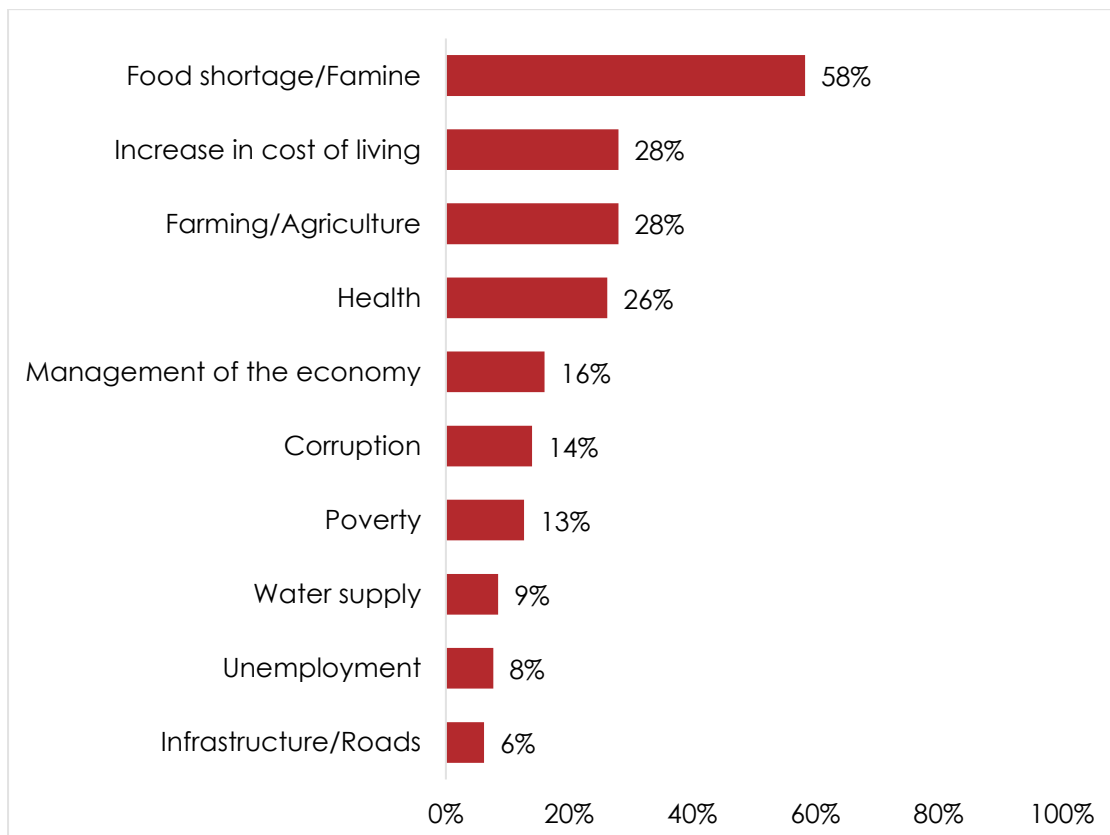
Given these food shortages, it is not surprising that food insecurity ranks at the top of citizens' priorities for government action: 58% of respondents cite food shortage/famine as one of the country's most important problems, followed by the related issues of agriculture (28%) and the increasing cost of living (28%) (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Went without enough food at least 'several times' | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough food to eat? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

**Figure 2: Most important problems | Malawi | 2024**

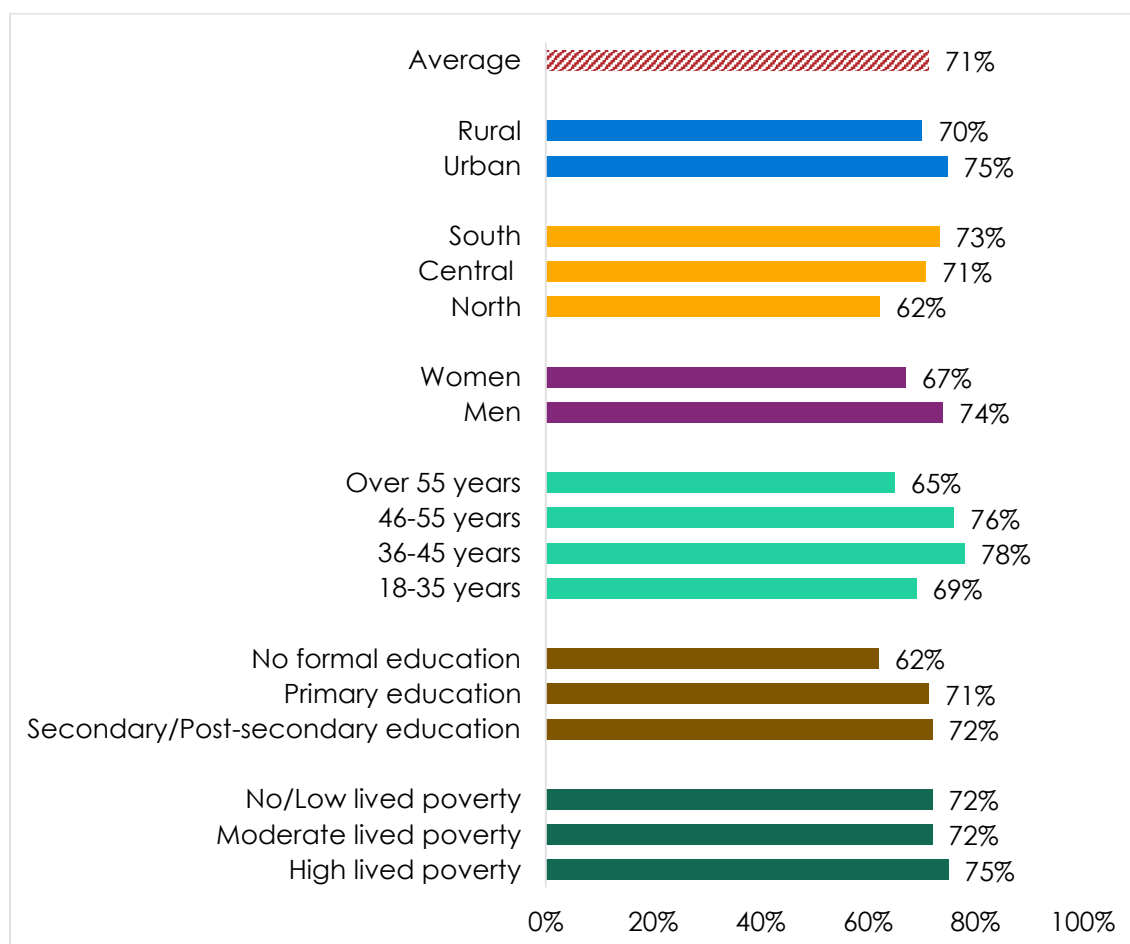


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person. Figure shows the % of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)

## Who benefits from the Affordable Inputs Programme?

Perceptions of who benefits are an important factor in public support for government-funded subsidies. Seven in 10 Malawians (71%) say that the AIP benefits “particular people, parties, or interests” rather than all farmers equally. This perception is particularly widespread in urban areas (75%), in the South (73%), among men (74%), and among middle-aged citizens (76%-78%) (Figure 3).

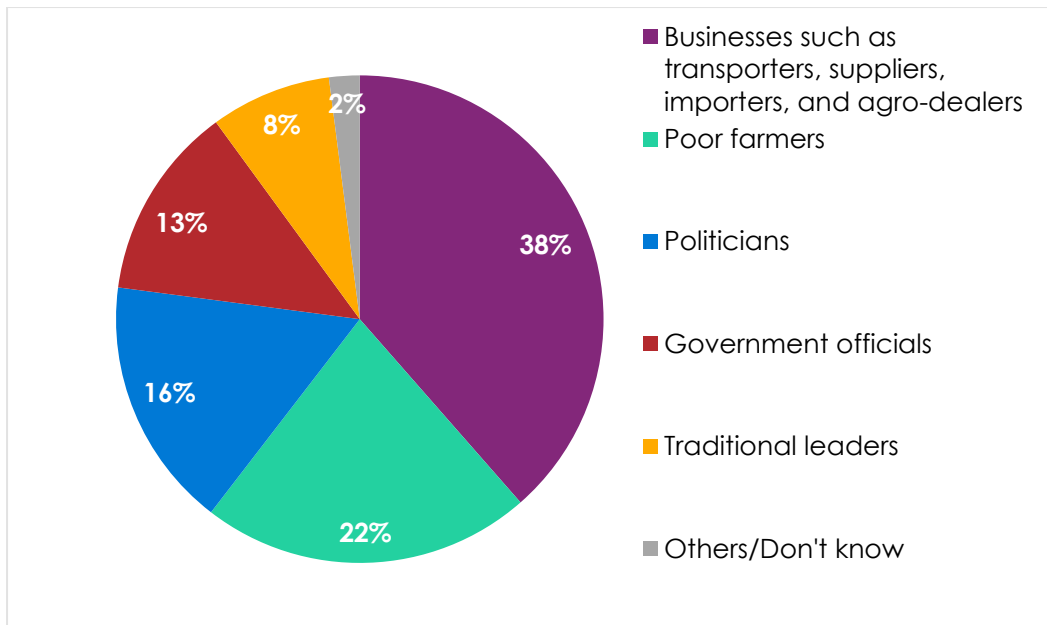
**Figure 3: Perception that the AIP favours particular people, politicians, or interests**  
| by demographic group | Malawi | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The Agricultural Inputs Subsidy Programme for farmers favours particular people, parties, or interests.

When asked who benefits most from the AIP, only one in five respondents (22%) say it's poor farmers (Figure 4). The most common response is that businesses such as transporters, suppliers, importers, and agro-dealers benefit most (38%), while 16% think it's politicians, 13% government officials, and 8% traditional leaders.

**Figure 4: Who benefits most from the AIP? | Malawi | 2024**

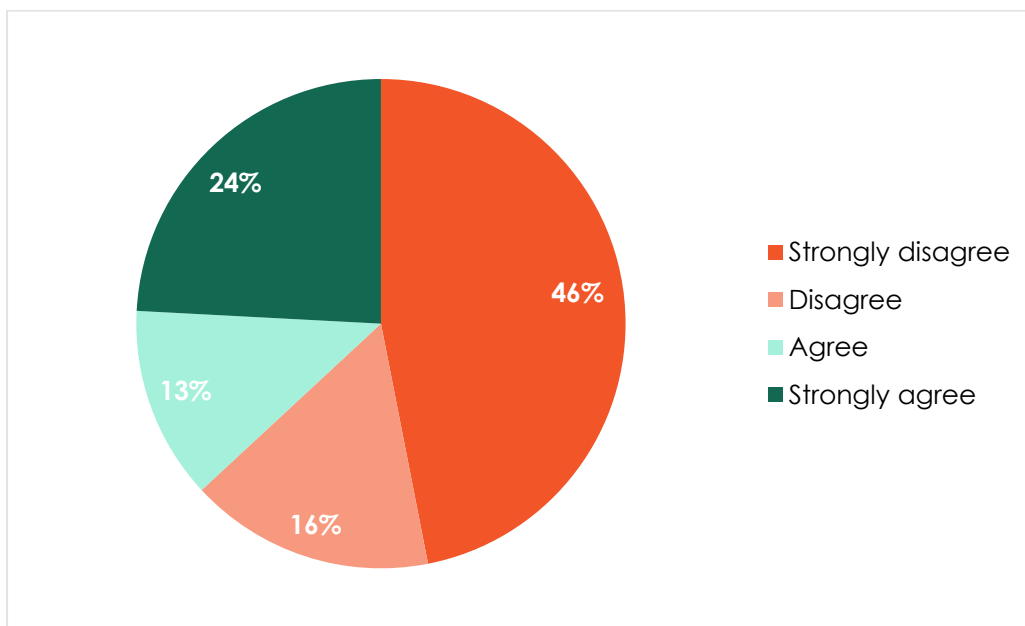


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, who among the following would you say benefits the most from the Agricultural Inputs Subsidy Programme?

### Should the government abolish the AIP?

Despite concerns about who its primary beneficiaries are, almost two-thirds (63%) of Malawians are opposed to abolishing the AIP, including almost half (46%) who “strongly disagree” with the idea (Figure 5).

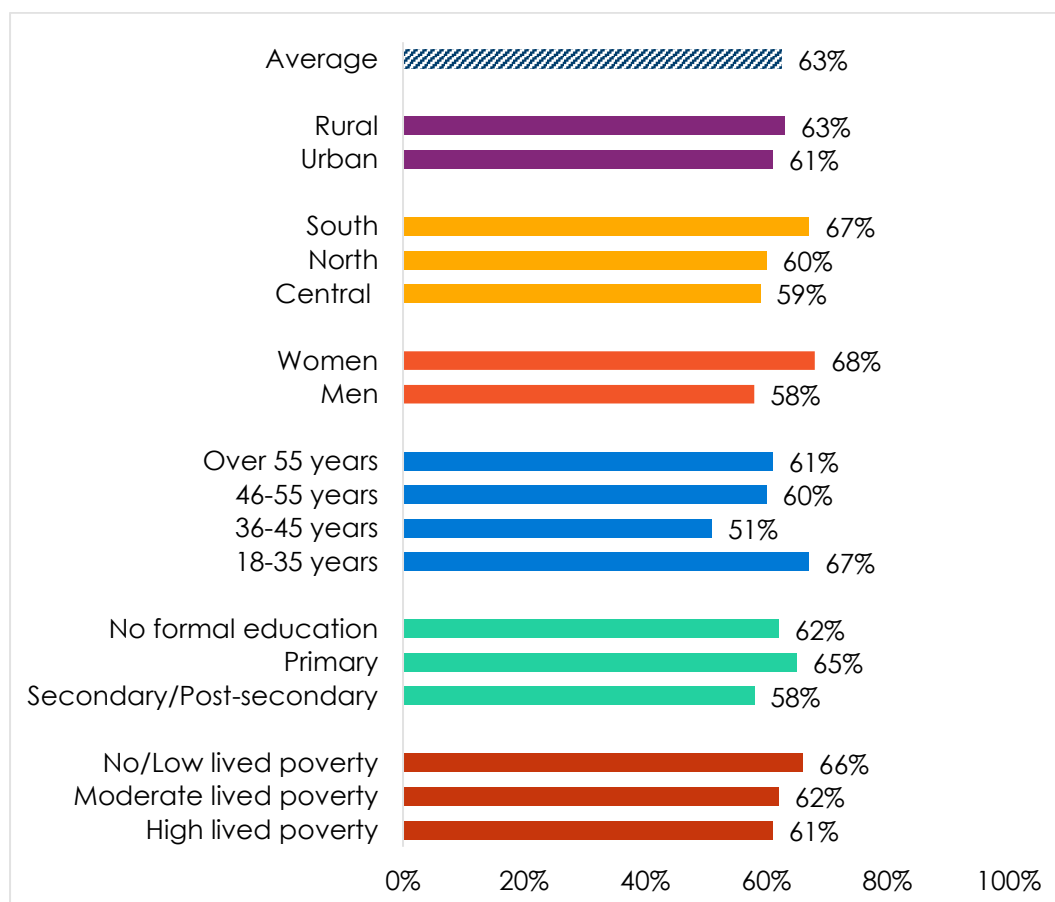
**Figure 5: Should the government abolish the AIP? | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The Agricultural Inputs Subsidy Programme is no longer helping farmers; it should therefore be abolished.

Opposition to eliminating the programme is especially widespread in the South (67%), among women (68%), among young respondents (67%), and among economically better-off citizens (66%)<sup>1</sup> (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Opposition to abolishing the AIP | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The Agricultural Inputs Subsidy Programme is no longer helping farmers; it should therefore be abolished. (% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”)

### Assessment of alternatives to the AIP

Public discussion of the issue has included advocacy of at least three alternatives to the AIP: distribution of food items instead of agricultural inputs, promotion of farmers' clubs that would provide loans, and distribution of money to allow farmers to buy inputs on their own.

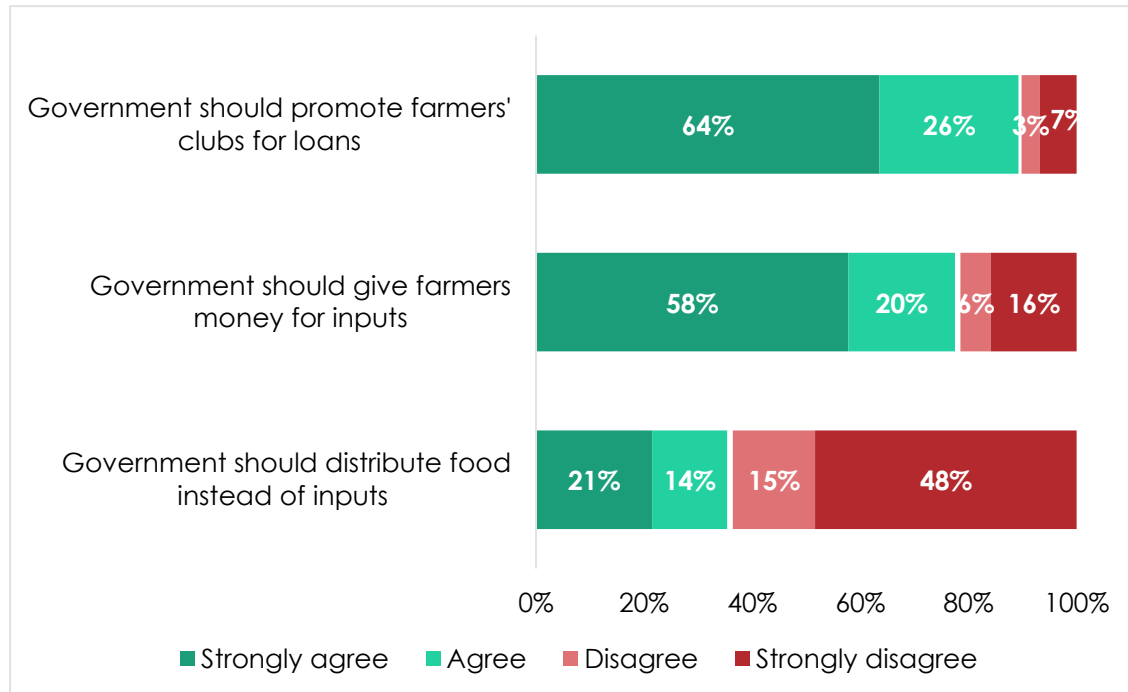
Among these three alternatives, the promotion of farmers' clubs that would provide loans is the most popular: Nine out of 10 respondents (89%)<sup>2</sup> favour this policy option, including 64% who “strongly agree” with the idea (Figure 7).

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

<sup>2</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 64% “strongly agree” and 26% “agree” sum to 89%).

More than three-fourths (78%) also endorse giving farmers money to buy inputs themselves, while only a minority (35%) support distributing food instead of inputs.

**Figure 7: Alternatives to the current AIP method | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Some Malawians say the Agriculture Inputs Subsidy Programme or AIP is not working very well and have suggested other ways of helping poor farmers. For each of the following suggestions, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

*The government should give farmers money to buy agricultural inputs on their own.*

*The government should promote establishment of farmers' clubs and provide agricultural loans through them.*

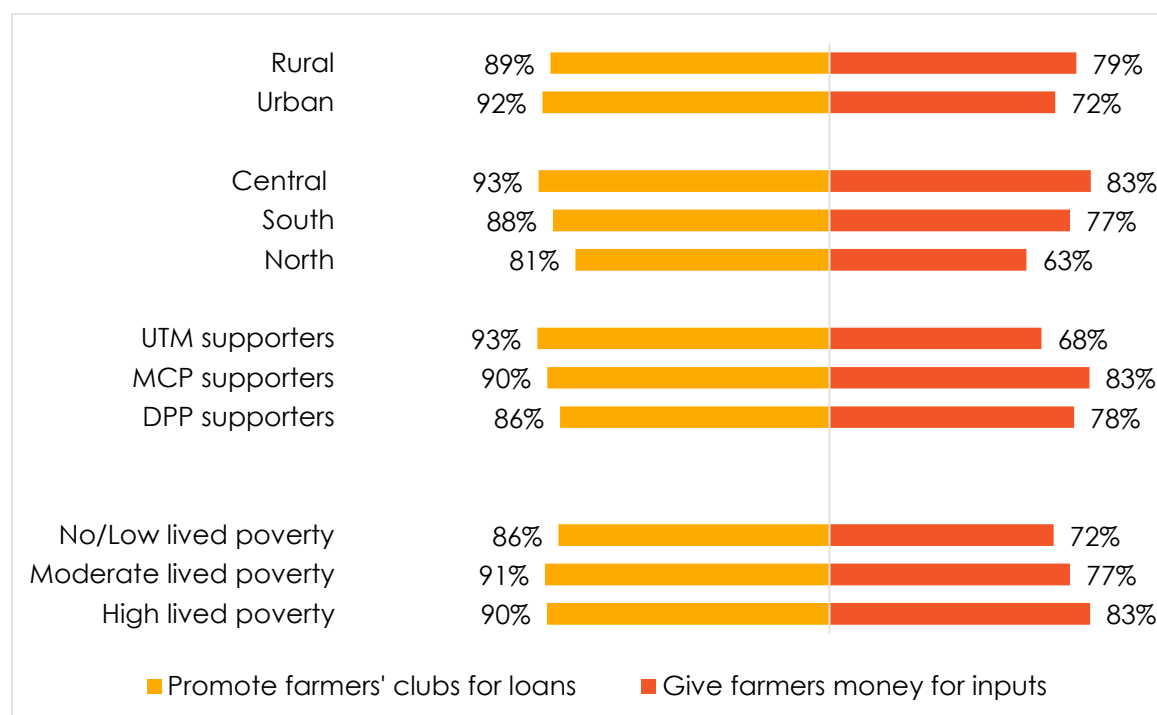
*The government should distribute food to poor households instead of subsidised fertilisers and seeds.*

While support for loans through farmers' clubs is solid across key demographic groups, the idea is somewhat more popular in the Central (93%) than in the South (88%) and North (81%) regions (Figure 8). It is also supported across political party lines, including by adherents of the United Transformation Movement (UTM) (93%), the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (90%), and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (86%).

Support for the provision of cash instead of agricultural inputs is particularly widespread in rural areas (79%), in the Central Region (83%), and among the poorest respondents (83%).

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**Figure 8: Support for promoting farmers' clubs for loans and for giving farmers money for inputs | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Some Malawians say the Agricultural Inputs Subsidy Programme or AIP is not working very well and have suggested other ways of helping poor farmers. For each of the following suggestions, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

The government should promote establishment of farmers' clubs and provide agricultural loans through them.

The government should give farmers money to buy agricultural inputs on their own.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each proposal)

## Conclusion

Results of the most recent Afrobarometer survey confirm the growing urgency of food insecurity in Malawi, which citizens consider by far the most important problem that the government must address.

But Malawians hold mixed views of the government's current Agricultural Inputs Programme. Majorities say the AIP favours particular people, parties, or interests and mainly benefits agriculture-related businesses or public officials rather than poor farmers. Nonetheless, rather than abolishing inputs subsidies, Malawians overwhelmingly support proposed alternatives such as providing input loans through farmers' clubs or providing cash for inputs to poor farmers.

These findings speak directly to the government and development partners, informing discussions on what might work to make subsidy programmes cost-effective in meeting the critical objective of food security.



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