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Research Article

Livelihoods and the Changing Context and Terms of *Ganyu* Labour in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Ganyu, a form of casualised labour in Malawi, is a prominent source of food and income for especially struggling rural households. The aim of the paper is to explore and analyse the *ganyu* phenomenon and its changing nature in Malawi to grasp the interaction of the complex issues shaping livelihoods and driving *ganyu*. A critical understanding of the dimensions of *ganyu* is essential to appreciate its different facets. The paper argues that *ganyu* is an informal safety net for households to diversify their livelihoods and cope with persistent vulnerability to floods and droughts. The paper is unique and significant in providing a convincing explanation of the evolution and the changing nature of *ganyu,* both in rural and urban areas. The paper recommends the Malawian government to formally acknowledge and accept the contribution and importance of *ganyu* as a social safety net. To this extent, the study makes a modest but meaningful contribution towards the literature on off-farm livelihoods strategies.

Keywords: farmers, livelihoods, *ganyu*, households, Malawi, sustainable, rural, food security

1. Introduction

Malawi's rural households are increasingly supplementing their food reserves and incomes through off-farm livelihood strategies such as *ganyu* especially since climate change is making it harder for them to solely depend on agriculture (Kerr 2005; Gono, Takane and Mazibuko 2023). The country is predominantly rural (84.4%), with 82% of its population comprising resource-poor farmers (Government of Malawi 2020a). It remains one of the poorest countries in the world (Sitienei, Mishra and Khanal 2016), with 38% of its population living below the poverty line and 47% of its children are stunted (USAID 2022). The prevalence of HIV/Aids (Bryceson 2006), the Covid-19 pandemic, floods and droughts have adversely impacted on the country's agricultural sector over time (MwAPATA 2022).

During periods of natural disasters, Malawi's poor rural households supplement their food reserves through *ganyu* casual work. The World Food Programme (2010) noted that recurrent floods and droughts, inputs shortage and unaffordability, and low and variable crop production contribute to Malawi's food insecurity, compelling many Malawians to find alternative food sources annually. Several studies (Whiteside 2000; Malawi Government 2004, 2020; Bryceson 2006; Dimova, Michaelowa and Weber 2010a, 2010b) found that most Malawian rural households partake in *ganyu* which now plays an important role in mobilizing food for both rural and urban households. *Ganyu* protects poor households against extreme poverty and food shortage during periods of deficit and effectively becomes a paradoxical risk management mechanism (Devereux 1999). In essence, *ganyu* can function as a social institution and a widely practiced tradition within various ethno-cultural and socio-economic contexts, where labour, cash, or farm produce are exchanged for mutual benefit. However, despite its widespread practice and importance as both an ex-post livelihood coping strategy and ex-ante social insurance mechanism (Dimova et al. 2010a), *ganyu's* changing nature and terms in the context of recurrent floods and droughts induced by extreme weather events remains an under-researched aspect.

While research on *ganyu* is limited (Kerr 2005), it is arguably quite important for the poor not to be misunderstood by those who design and implement development and social safety net interventions in Malawi (Whiteside 2000). Previous studies on *ganyu* viewed it as only a rural phenomenon mainly practiced by women according to Gono et al. (2023) while Whiteside (2000) noted that *ganyu* is a culturally embedded livelihood

strategy where men, women, and children can undertake it and get paid in kind or cash. *Ganyu* also features in the Malawi Government's five official Integrated Household Survey (IHS) reports, including the most recent and Fifth IHS 2020 Report (Malawi Government 2020a), as an important livelihood and food security strategy for the poor. Therefore, the changing nature, dynamics and terms of *ganyu* could be better understood by development agents, social welfare role players and policymakers for consideration when formulating policy and related programmes.

This paper explores and demonstrates the evolution, on-going changes, varieties and even contradictions in the understanding and practices of *ganyu,* not only as a livelihood strategy, but also as a form of social assistance and even an economic transaction for some. The paper demonstrates the centrality of *ganyu* as a form of social capital and informal safety net among communities that diversify their livelihood to cope with vulnerability exposures to floods and drought and to meet urgent and small food or cash needs. The paper presents an analysis of *ganyu,* as it is understood in the context of Malawi, tracing it from its historical origins before delving into a critical analysis of livelihoods, the drivers of *ganyu* and its changing nature, features and practices. This is followed by a discussion on the nexus of *ganyu* and livelihoods in the current context of Malawi, and its changing and contradicting nature, terms and practice among Malawians.

2. Theoretical analysis of *ganyu*

Ganyu denotes a range of social relationships and system for households. The concept is widely used to describe a range of short-term rural and urban work relationships and associated payments. Whiteside (2000) noted that historically the most common types of *ganyu* work involved crop planting, fence repairs, making bricks, weeding, digging, and harvesting undertaken at other farmers' homesteads, fields or gardens. This form of *ganyu* work is mainly done by poor households to replenish their food reserves or earn income to buy food and other necessities. However, *ganyu* has become common in less poor rural households and among urban households, especially the poorer ones. To this extent, *ganyu* is a highly complex, moral, and relational phenomenon with both social and economic aspects.

Bryceson (2006) refers to this trend of *ganyu* as a changing etymology and meaning with growing ubiquity and usage of the concept over time. Yet, despite its livelihood and economic aspects, household wellbeing and wealth cannot be achieved or sustained through *ganyu* alone because it is a subsistence strategy that is insufficient for wealth accumulation. Traditionally *ganyu* labour was meant and provided for neighbours and relatives according to Whitseside (2000), even though Bryceson (2006) traced it across colonial borders into Mozambique.

Ganyu, however, remains one of the main coping mechanisms, especially for poor households to combat food insecurity and livelihood shocks (Kerr 2005), Dimova et al. (2010a), and Gono et al. (2023). To this extent, *ganyu* labour plays an important role as a key mechanism to access food for many Malawian households (Sitienei et al. 2016), in addition to its social networking role that was mainly driven by women as a form of community moral responsibility, according to Dimova et al. (2010a).

Historically, as a predominantly rural livelihood strategy, *ganyu* arose during the British colonial period in the early twentieth century alongside contractual labour relations such as the *thangata* system on commercial farms (Whiteside 2000). *Ganyu* served different purposes in the first half of the twentieth century, with households that either lacked adequate arable land or had excess labour resolving the imbalances through hiring out *ganyu* labour (Bryceson 2006). Regardless of wealth status, households that were short of labour due to absent male migrants accessed additional labour seasonally through *ganyu*. During the development of colonial capitalism in Malawi, migrant labour left in huge numbers for South African and Rhodesian mines (Vaughan 1998). The returning migrant labourers who had cash and could afford generating income from smallholder farming resulted in money circulating around the villages and options for cash-based *ganyu* labour among smallholders (Bryceson 2006).

The supply of *ganyu* labour has been associated with poorer households that sought food, goods, or cash from better-off households through hiring out their labour. Although at times *ganyu* occurred between equals who sought to meet temporary household labour shortages, it is steeped in patron-client relations. Whilst those who hired *ganyu* could be perceived as being interested in optimising economic gain and wealth, Englund (1996) argues that hiring labour from fellow community members in need was locally understood as philanthropic and unselfish. As such, *ganyu* was viewed as a socio-cultural disguise and economic reality in which lineage and community relations were preserved and kept in check.

Bryceson (2006) states that when Malawian women engaged in *ganyu* labour they insisted on a payment agreement upfront to avoid any form of deferred reciprocity and moral obligation. This strategy employed by the women also sought to ease the moral responsibility that is illustrated in a local saying that 'a favour granted is a form of insurance that must be returned at a future date'. The country's peasantry history of forced wage

labour could explain the women's preference and the strategy of opting for an exchange model that placed less family reciprocal obligations on them (Bryceson 2006). In a conservative context with strong patriarchal attitudes and gender relations that weakened women's position against men, the strategy sought to protect the women against being taken advantage of when the terms of *ganyu* were changed.

Many changes in the local farming practices, such as irrigated and dry season wetland garden farming (pit-planting), donor-supported farming starter packs, cash crop farming (tobacco) and diversification of farming into other crops like cassava and sweet potato, away from maize, are inter-related with *ganyu* practices (Whiteside 2000). The demand for labour varied across the different farming practices that were determined by weather and socio-economic conditions among other factors. Such changes resulted in the spreading of the period of labour demand to the benefit of poor households that depend on *ganyu*.

Work parties and reciprocal exchange of *ganyu* labour for food, between households, was another version of *ganyu* that continued into the post-independence period, but it dwindled during the decades into independence (Bryceson 2006). As *ganyu* dwindled the relations of general reciprocity that were common among peasant producers gradually faded. The relations of general reciprocity were replaced by morally constructed 'balanced reciprocity' that was based on growing disparities in asset ownership between households, according to Bryceson (2006). The new moral economy of *ganyu* based on differential asset ownership resulted in *ganyu* becoming the main form of inter-household exchange of labour between subsistence producers.

2.1 Types of ganyu

There are about six discernible and main types of *ganyu* found in Malawi according to various authors and studies discussed in this section. Whilst the *ganyu* types are quite different in form, practice, purpose and definition and at times inconsistent, they however also have some distinct features and common aspects about them. The first type of *ganyu* is what Whiteside (2000) identifies as *chipere ganyu* which is the original form where neighbours or families undertook work parties by taking turns to work as a group on each other's fields, and meals and drinks were provided to cater for the work party as some form of gratitude. The work undertaken included a range of agricultural activities such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and non-agricultural labour like digging a well or building a house. This form of *ganyu* can be undertaken by either young people or adults. Triverdy (1990) found this type of *ganyu* was declining in the Southern region of Malawi and replaced by other forms of *ganyu*.

The second type is *ganyu* labour that is used for field preparations, seed planting, weeding, harvesting, and threshing that is usually undertaken on wealthier farms (*kontalakiti*) around October–February when household food reserves are usually low (Whiteside 2000). The payment is usually in cash, or in kind or a combination and done on a piecework basis. Pearce, Ngwira and Chimseu (1996) state that this form of *ganyu* can be carried out within local or distant communities, including across international borders in communities near such borders. The *ganyu* provider hosts those providing the labour for the duration of the work activities which can last for several days, weeks or a few months, according to Whiteside (2000).

The third type of *ganyu* is specifically used as a livelihood coping strategy during times of acute food shortage around the October-February period when the least secure households look for *ganyu* in exchange for food (Pearce et al. 1996; Whiteside 2000). The provision of food in exchange for work is viewed and understood as a social obligation for those with food in response to piecework they may want done in a bid to assist those in need (Whiteside 2000).

The fourth type of *ganyu* takes place on commercial estates and involves daily travels or temporary onsite residence for the work period. Tea, sugar and tobacco commercial estates pay a minimum daily or weekly wage and employ large numbers of *ganyu* employees (Pearce et al. 1996). The key distinction of this *ganyu* type is that those who undertake it go to commercial farms with the sole of aim of raising a specific amount of income to meet a specific need, usually a domestic one (Whiteside 2000). They are more in control of their engagement period and once they have raised enough for their need they return home to carry on with their household activities.

The fifth form of *ganyu* is non-agricultural labour for unskilled rural tasks such as brick making, digging wells, and cleaning fish for fishermen at Lake Malawi (Whiteside 2000). The growing prominence of the local fishing industry around Lake Malawi has seen fishing *ganyu* grow as a distinct sub-category of non-agricultural *ganyu*. This is locally significant and involves pulling in fishing nets, cleaning fish and doing other tasks in return for a share of the catch (Kanyamuka 2021). This type of *ganyu* is usually performed during the dry and non-farming season so that it does not conflict with household farm production activities.

The sixth and last type of *ganyu* is done by children and youth (Whiteside 2000). It can be agricultural or not and it is common among children from poor families who accompany their parents to undertake *ganyu* for

food during months of acute food shortage. Youth undertake piecework such as fetching water for other households or building contractors to earn pocket money for themselves or to contribute towards household needs. This form of *ganyu* was popular in Salima, Mangochi and Zomba districts where both young men and women undertook it mainly for purposes of raising money to apply for passports to travel outside Malawi (mainly to South Africa) in search of job prospects (Kanyamuka 2021; Saruchera 2019).

Whilst there may be no consistent and distinct features and differences in the form, purpose and definition between the different forms of *ganyu*, these categories are found in literature (Whiteside, 2000) and they are useful in this paper's analysis of *ganyu* and its changing nature, terms and practice.

3. Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative research methodology that is commonly used in the social sciences and humanities, and it is more suitable for the study given its sociological nature. Qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data e.g. text, audio, narratives and video to understand experiences, opinions and concepts (Bhandari 2023). It is used to collect and generate in-depth insights into issues under investigation such as the changing trends and nature of *ganyu* in Malawi examined by this paper. To this extent, qualitative research can be used to explore and understand people's experiences of different phenomena.

However, qualitative research has its shortcomings and risk that include negative attribution bias, recall bias, observer bias and social desirability bias (Bhandari 2023). Whilst such biases are inevitable, researchers should be ethical and aware of such biases when collecting and analysing data to avoid the adverse impact that may arise. To this extent, this paper is aware of the social desirability bias risk inherent in how the notion of *ganyu* is perceived and understood by many within the context of Malawi, resulting in different labour practices, nature and terms that can be contradicting and yet all are called *ganyu*.

There are several flexible approaches to qualitative research that focus on generating deep and rich meanings and insights when they are used to interpret data. Bhandari (2023) identifies such approaches that include action research, grounded theory, narrative research, ethnography, and phenomenological research, all of which emphasize different perspectives and aims and yet sharing some similarities. Of these approaches, this paper uses a combination of phenomenological and narrative research which investigated the phenomenon of *ganyu* by interpreting and describing the lived experiences of rural farmer participants and examines how stories are narrated to understand how the Malawian participants observe and make sense and meaning of their own experiences of *ganyu*. What may not look or seem like *ganyu* to the outsider is interpreted, described and understood as *ganyu* by the participants, and may thus be debatable when critically analysed and discussed in the broader context beyond the local.

The qualitative research approaches outlined above use several data collection methods, and the most common ones include surveys, focus groups discussions, interviews, and secondary research (Creswell 2014). This paper used secondary research that involved collecting existing data texts from different sources. One of the key secondary research sources was the author's doctoral case study of Malawi's Salima District which directly interacted with local farmers over four years (Saruchera 2019). Data for the Salima District study was collected from Mphunga Group Village in Traditional Authority Ndindi in the Central region of Malawi, from local farmers, non-government organisations (NGOs) officials, traditional authorities, and government officials in a longitudinal study from 2013–2017. The data was collected through a series of village meetings, participant observations during the months of staying with the farmers, in-depth interviews with key informants, household surveys and life histories of six farmers, focus group discussions.

The objective of the Salima District study was to investigate how Malawian smallholder farmers' experience, understand, and respond to extreme weather patterns on their livelihoods. The farmers' interactions with a range of social actors (experts and non-experts, state and non-state) and how that influences their understanding of and response to extreme weather events as well as the significance of social capital in their coping strategies were explored.

Another key secondary data source used in the paper included a critical review of other studies and the Government of Malawi's Integrated Household Survey (IHS) on livelihoods, *ganyu* and related issues. The IHS is an official data collection instrument conducted every 3-5 years by the Malawian National Statistical Office (NSO) with the objective of providing reliable and timely information on Malawi's socio-economic and welfare indicators (Government of Malawi 2020a). The surveys highlight the population's living conditions and serve the country's planning and monitoring progress on the achievement of development goals as stipulated in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) and the Sustainable Development Goals (Government of Malawi 2020a).

Ganyu features in all the five IHS reports produced until 2020, and it is not only one of the sources for food and income generating activities, but also as a mitigation measure for overcoming shocks (Government of Malawi 2020a). To this extent, *ganyu* is a social safety net and provides food security and coping strategies for the households in need in Malawi. The Salima District study and Malawi Government IHS reports (2004, 2020a and 2020b) are combined with other studies (Whiteside 2000; Bryceson 2006; Dimova et al. 2010a, 2010b; Sitienei et al. 2016; Kanyamuka 2021) that were critically reviewed in exploring the role, changing nature and terms of *ganyu* in relation to livelihoods. The other studies, notably by Englund (1996), Whiteside (2000), Bryceson (2006), Dimova et al, (2010a, 2010b) and Sitienei et al. (2016), give a historical perspective and the ongoing importance of *ganyu* for social, economic and other relationships within the context of Malawi.

The recent studies by Kanyamuka (2021) and the Government IHS reports (2020a and 2020b) provide insights into the new trends of *ganyu* and specific livelihood needs in the current context of multiple and recurrent shocks (mainly floods and droughts). The growing overreliance on *ganyu* as a social safety net and livelihood coping mechanism is leading to its diversification, contradictions, and ubiquity in both rural and urban settings due to frequent livelihood shocks. The shocks include poor macro-economic conditions, extreme weather events, demographic pressure, dwindling land availability and access (Peters and Kambewa 2007).

4. Review of study findings on *ganyu*

Over time, *ganyu* labour negotiations and agreements were shaped by a combination of social sentiments, material practicality, and socio-economic and cultural needs. These integrated community and familial obligations, class difference and neighbourly relations in the bargaining process between suppliers and receivers of *ganyu*. Such factors have contributed towards the change in the practice, nature and terms of *ganyu*. For instance, previous research found that *ganyu* was predominantly practiced by rural poorer households and less educated individuals (Whiteside 2000, Dimova et al. 2010a, 2010b; Bryceson 2006; Sitienei et al. 2016). More recent studies (Malawi Government 2020a; Kanyamuka 2021) show shifting trends as educational qualifications, gender and place/location (rural or urban) are no longer key determinant factors for partaking in *ganyu* or its occurrence.

Ganyu also enables young adults from Mangochi and Zomba districts to raise money for passports travel to South Africa which makes it possible for some of the migrants to send remittances and support their families back home (Kanyamuka 2021). The casual piece jobs for cash undertaken by young adults from Salima District (Saruchera 2019) and Mangochi and Zomba district (Kanyamuka 2021) may seem like basic casualised labour and straightforward economic transactions to outsiders. However, for the *ganyu* participants, the Malawian Government IHS Reports (2020a and 2020b) and Malawian researchers like Kanyamuka (2021) these arrangements were understood and referred to as *ganyu*. Due to persistent poverty, growing unemployment and food insecurity, *ganyu* labour remains a practical social safety net and livelihood strategy of choice for many households, irrespective of gender and educational background.

Kanyamuka's (2021) study identified migration as a key livelihood in Zomba and Mangochi districts, with international migration destinations being Mozambique and South Africa. The author further states that ultra-poor households migrate to Mozambique which is closer to Malawi and cheaper to travel for on-farm *ganyu* on a seasonal basis, whilst South Africa is a popular and preferred destination for migrants in the non-agricultural sector. Migration to South Africa for purposes of unskilled employment is one of the major off-farm livelihood strategies, and migrants often undertake local *ganyu,* or rely on networks of friends and family already in South Africa, to support them with costs for passports and travel as well as links for jobs (Kanyamuka 2021).

Supporting migration costs from *ganyu* income was a common trend in Salima District as reported by Saruchera (2019) and noted by Bryceson (2006) who stated that remittances from outside Malawi (and urban relations) were a growing source of livelihood support in rural households' famine strategies. The remittances often compliment *ganyu* labour and compensate for lack of adult labour or physical incapacitation which prevents overdependency on *ganyu* labour (Kanyamuka 2021).

4.1 Ganyu and livelihoods

Many Malawian households rely on multiple sources of income and support from different family members, each pursuing a combination of farming and non-farming livelihood strategies. These include *ganyu* for wetland, rain-fed and irrigated farming, pit-planting (*kugoma*), fishing, migration, and small trade (Saruchera, 2019), representing a portfolio of livelihood activities.

Data from several studies indicates that in some years *ganyu* and other livelihood strategies are used by most households during the difficult five months (October-February), and for longer periods by the minority of households (Whiteside 2000; Bryceson 2006; Dimova et al. 2010a, 2010b; Sitienei et al. 2016; Malawi Government 2004, 2020a, 2020b; Kanyamuka 2021). The poorest may still rely on *ganyu* for half a year in

good years. During challenging years, more than 80% of households run out of maize (the staple food) and *ganyu* availability becomes scarce (Whiteside 2000).

Opportunities for *ganyu* are not always available, especially during difficult years and the 'hunger months' between January and March (for Mangochi and Zomba districts) when demand is high, and farmers have no food (Kanyamuka 2021). During such times, poor and vulnerable households resort to selling their productive assets to buy food. Whilst the very poor households are exposed to the same risks of theft, disease, poor soil fertility, floods and droughts, their ability to cope is more limited. Their high dependency on *ganyu* work means that during limited farming activity they are more vulnerable, for example during drought or cyclone-induced floods. Tropical cyclones Idai, Ana and Freddy are some of the most recent natural disasters that happened in Malawi between 2019 and 2023, wreaking havoc on arable land, food supplies, fresh water sources and public health as a result (IOM 2023).

The growing prevalence of extreme weather events compounded by national economic challenges, poor health outcomes among other shocks, lead to *ganyu* supply outstripping demand. This reduces available work opportunities and the bargaining position of *ganyu* seekers. The resultant widespread famine distress and destitution increase the vulnerability of households' food security, which leaves *ganyu* providers with no surplus cash or food (Bryceson 2006).

Although *ganyu* mainly secures short-term livelihood needs for many households, it has adverse implications for those who continue to depend on it over a long time. According to Mkandawire and Ferguson (1990), some of the main challenges for households that rely on *ganyu* continually are that:

- *Ganyu* does not always benefit all household members when payments are in cash and women complain that men do not spend the cash on food,
- The payment from *ganyu* tends to be low and inadequate to sustain households for long and the *ganyu* is often done at the cost of own farming production during the summer season,
- *Ganyu*-dependent households may be unable to work on their own farms or adopt intensified practices and technologies, and
- In cases where both husband and wife do *ganyu,* young children are left alone with insufficient or no food in households that experience food deficit.

The low payment from *ganyu* usually meets the basic minimum for short-term survival needs, but with no surplus generated for investment, therefore trapping households in a vicious cycle of low productivity. Leach (1995) and Whiteside (2000) found that even with *ganyu* income, households with smaller landholdings do not earn adequate income to make up for their maize deficit. Such households go hungry and depend on other coping strategies such as *ganyu*, with a day's *ganyu* income only meeting a few days' food needs for a family.

4.2 Integrated household surveys and regional trends of ganyu in Malawi

The importance and contribution of *ganyu* towards food security has been confirmed by several studies discussed earlier and this includes the recent Integrated Household Survey reports compiled by the Malawian Government (Malawi Government 2020a and 2020b) and a study by Kanyamuka (2021). To assess the occurrence of *ganyu* across rural Malawi, this paper uses data from the fifth Integrated Household Survey Report 2020 that covered a stratified random total sample of 11, 434 households across the country (Malawi Government 2020a). The report focuses on the sampled farming households that were engaged in farming, representing 84.7% of the surveyed households.

A total of 78.7% of the households owned or cultivated fields during the rainy season and 18.4% owned or cultivated a wetland plot or garden (*dimba*) during the winter season, whilst 92.8% households in rural areas engaged in farming activities compared to 43.7% farmers in urban areas (Malawi Government 2020a). More females (58.2%) than males (47.4%) in the age group 15-64 years undertook *ganyu* labour to generate income in both rural and urban areas, according to the fifth Integrated Household Survey 2020 Report (Malawi Government 2020a). A possible explanation for the shifting trends of *ganyu* being undertaken in urban areas and more males participating in it could be the deepening poverty, unemployment, extreme weather events and other shocks that are leaving households more vulnerable and with fewer options to survive. The definition of *ganyu* is also increasingly broadened and loose to refer to any piecework, notably for cash and other uses apart from household food needs.

Ganyu provides a range of contributions to household livelihoods, and it is difficult to interpret quantitatively on its importance. This is compounded by authors defining *ganyu* differently and the distinct geographical wealth groups and seasonal variations across Malawi's Northern, central and Southern regions, as well as between rural and urban households (Bryceson 2006). Sjim (1990) found that the proportion of households hiring *ganyu* varied between 95% and 7% in the different districts of Malawi. The Malawi Government (2020a) reported that in the Southern region, 16% relied on *ganyu*, in the Central and Northern regions 14.1% and

13.2% respectively depended on *ganyu* whilst 20.1% of the urban households and 14.2% of rural households depended on *ganyu* as reflected during the fifth Integrated Household Survey of 2019. The high dependence on *ganyu* in the urban areas is significant as it has become an urban phenomenon more than the historical rural occurrence. The increasing urban poverty due to rising unemployment and rural-urban migration could possibly explain this trend.

Research by the Malawian Government (2020a) also shows that on average in a week, 14.8 hours was spent on *ganyu* labour compared to 14.4 hours spent on household agricultural or fishing activities, and 24.4 hours on non-agricultural and non-fishing business by individuals aged between 15-64 years. There are considerable differences in *ganyu* labour prevalence across the three regions of Malawi. The Malawi Government (2020a) states that *ganyu* is more frequent in the Central region (53.2%) followed by the Southern region (50.1%) and Northern region (39.6%) where people aged 15-64 years engage in *ganyu* labour during both summer and winter seasons to access food or generate income to buy food and other household needs.

Across all three regions there is more demand for *ganyu* during the rainy season in summer, especially between January-March when many households run out of food. This is unlike the dry winter season where *ganyu* labour demand is mainly from wetlands gardens (*dimba*) and harvesting. The high demand for *ganyu* during the difficult months in summer is confirmed by Whiteside (2000), Bryceson (2006), Dimova et al. (2010a and 2010b) and Sitienei et al. (2016) and Kanyamuka (2019) in the earlier discussion on *ganyu* typologies and *ganyu* and livelihoods.

The Malawi Government (2020a) has also noted that the Southern region has the highest number of hours spent (16 hours) on *ganyu* followed by the Central region (14.1 hours) and the Northern region (13.2 hours). Whilst the differences of hours spent on *ganyu* are minimal across the three regions, the disparities could be partly informed by population, urbanisation, employment, and income differentials. The age of the household head is a factor that is likely to increase chances of finding *ganyu* labour, depending on the type of work to be done. The fifth IHS Report shows that the highest proportion (96.7%) of individuals who were engaged in *ganyu* income generating activities were 35-49 years and the lowest proportion of individuals (84.4%) was 15-24 years (Malawi Government 2020a).

Male-headed households experienced higher migration of 9.2% compared to female-headed households that recorded 6%, whilst Mzuzu City in the Northern region had the highest national proportion of migrants (28%) who left the country and Zomba rural had the lowest migrants (3%) according to the fifth IHS report (Malawi Government 2020a). The reasons for migration cited are varied, including for purposes of looking for work, to fundraise for starting a business, for marriage in the case of females and other family reasons.

4.3 Ganyu in Salima District

According to the fifth HIS report, in Salima District in the Central region of Malawi, in 2019 53.1% of the population between 15-64 years relied on *ganyu* whilst a weekly average of 15.6 hours was spent on *ganyu* by individuals in the same age group (Malawi Government 2020a). The most common forms of *ganyu* are preparing fresh fish for the market, farming tasks (ploughing, planting, weeding, and harvesting), making and baking bricks, shelling maize and digging wells (Saruchera 2019). The author states that *ganyu* work is available from better-off households and payments are either in cash or kind e.g. grain, with earnings varying from US$1 a day, depending on the work performed.

The study by Saruchera (2019) found out that some farmers were too embarrassed to identify as *ganyu* seekers in their own village and resorted to seeking *ganyu* in distant villages where they were not known or recognised. However, all the 129 households surveyed during the study had members who were engaged in *ganyu* to meet urgent household and personal needs. Young people were engaged in *ganyu* to generate income for passport applications and migration travel to South Africa and other places (Saruchera 2019; Malawi Government 2020a; Kanyamuka 2021).

As already stated by Whiteside (2000), Bryceson (2006) and others earlier in this paper, in Salima District poorer households also rely on *ganyu* as their only or main source of income or food and often do *ganyu* work at the cost of own farm work. Some of the farmers rented out their land to other farmers because they were unable to farm due to lack of inputs and food and thus relied on *ganyu* for immediate food relief. Competition between doing *ganyu* and attending to own farm production was critical as a two-week delay in field preparation led to significant yield returns.

Saruchera (2019) found that in a year of poor rains in Salima District, the poorer households failed to cultivate most of their land at the onset of the rainy season due to labour shortages because of doing *ganyu* for food or to buy basic inputs like seed. However, there was a positive correlation between undertaking *ganyu* and own farm production when farmers received seeds from the *ganyu*-supplying neighbour and repaid it later through weeding *ganyu*.

The poorer households also gleaned food from the fields of other household as *ganyu* opportunities were scarce during the most difficult months from December–March when they ran out of food and the demand for *ganyu* was high (Saruchera 2019). During the difficult months vulnerable households sold off their productive assets such as small livestock like poultry and farm implements to buy food. The high dependency on *ganyu* also meant that limited farming activity due to floods and drought left them with no *ganyu* opportunities in farming, and so they opted for other forms of *ganyu*. Peters and Kambewa (2007) state that competition over land, tenure insecurity and the trend of land rentals and illegal sales intensify social conflict over customary land, resulting in some poor households not accessing land and being perpetually subjected to *ganyu*.

4.4 Gender, age and ganyu

The role of gender in *ganyu* is well noted by Bryceson (2006) and Davison (1995) who gave an account of how Malawian women in matrilineal communities eased the weight of moral obligation in *ganyu* by insisting on a payment arrangement upfront, without deferred reciprocation responsibility. The women's eagerness to manage family reciprocal obligations was facilitated by Malawian peasantry's historical familiarity with wage labour relations which provided an alternative model of exchange that is relative to traditional reciprocal exchange (Bryceson 2006). The male migrant wage labour system also played a major role in increasing women's workload back home and created conditions that were not favourable for onerous deferred labour obligations, and the risk of social shame in the event of failing to repay family, friends, or neighbours.

Gender is an important factor in shaping and driving *ganyu* (Whiteside 2000; Bryceson 2006; Sitienei et al. 2016). Male-headed households are more likely to be involved in *ganyu* and even though women have been involved in *ganyu* for as long as men (Whiteside, 2000), there are gender and other differentials in remuneration from *ganyu*. However, the fifth Integrated Household Survey 2020 Report (Malawi Government 2020a) found out that more females (58.2%) than males (47.4%) in the age group 15-64 years undertook *ganyu* labour in both rural and urban areas. This is yet another shift and change that can possibly be explained by the migration of young and unskilled males who are migrating abroad for better work prospects.

Whilst age of the household head has historically played a huge factor that increased chances of finding *ganyu*, depending on the type of work to be done, the Malawi Government (2020a) survey findings confirmed this reality. Most of the household heads that engaged in *ganyu* activities were 35-49 years compared to those between 15-24 years. A disproportionate number of female-headed households are poor and labour-constrained hence unable to take up off-farm *ganyu* work. Men earn double than women and children are paid less than adults for the same piece of work (Saruchera 2019). Among the reasons for the gender differentials are attitudinal differences, the need for cash, domestic and childcare responsibilities as well as distance to the *ganyu* locations. However, with more livelihood shocks, famine, scarcity of local *ganyu* and more competition for local *ganyu* opportunities, women explore *ganyu* markets further away from home.

The terms of *ganyu* and wage rates tend to favour the employer who usually has more people to hire than *ganyu* work opportunities, especially during the difficult months and years when labour supply outstrips demand. Cases where men, women and children were paid different rates for the same work in a neighbouring village were common. The combination of gender and age factors in this case is steeped in conservative norms and values that are patriarchal. Whilst female farmers felt it was unfair and some of them did not go back to *ganyu* employers who paid them less than males, male and female *ganyu* employers found it an acceptable practice to different rates due to perceived differences in physical strength and the ability to undertake *ganyu* work (Saruchera 2019).

5. Key changes in *ganyu* features, practice, context and terms

Ganyu has been practised for many decades, and it has varied from work parties and reciprocal farm labour for food between households and pooling labour for families that had temporary labour shortages (Bryceson 2006). This form of *ganyu* continued post-independence until it started to dwindle decades later and that resulted in the reciprocity relations that were common among farming household gradually fading out. According to Bryceson (2006), the relations of reciprocity were replaced by morally constructed 'balanced reciprocity' that was based on growing disparities in asset ownership between households replaced the relations of *ganyu* reciprocity. This effectively became the new moral economy of *ganyu* based on differential asset ownership and inter-household labour exchange characterised by a range of short-term rural and urban work relationships and associated payments in cash or in kind.

Several changes across a continuum of *ganyu* practices have been observed and key among them are the following. The role of social sentiments and cultural needs has become less apparent and more complex in the different permutations of present-day *ganyu* where material practicality, and socio-economic needs have become more pronounced. Community and familial obligations, class difference and neighbourly relations in the bargaining process between suppliers and receivers of *ganyu* are mixed with material practicalities and economic needs of a patron-client nature (Dimova et al. 2010b). *Ganyu* was predominantly practiced by rural

poorer households and less educated individuals, and the common activities were planting crops, weeding, and harvesting (Whiteside 2000), and to a less extent between equals. This has since shifted as educational qualifications, socio-economic status, age, gender and whether rural or urban are no longer key determinant factors to partake in *ganyu* or determine its occurrence (Malawi Government 2020a).

In addition, there is a growing need and preference for cash payment more than food by those who undertake *ganyu*, notably the youth and younger adults who prefer money for migration purposes and pock money (Kanyamuka 2021). The purpose and role of *ganyu* has shifted from being a predominantly rural livelihood strategy (Dimova et al, 2010a) and coping mechanism to combat household food shortages, to meet a variety of personal and other needs. Remittances are replacing or complementing *ganyu* in supporting families (Vaughan 1998; Kanyamuka 2021). Regardless of wealth status, there is a growing trend of households that are short of farm and non-farm labour, due to absent male household members who migrated, and are now using remittances from migrants to access seasonal *ganyu* labour (Kanyamuka 2021). The different waves of migration are observed over time. Vaughan (1998) noted migrant labour that left in huge numbers for South African and Rhodesian mines and returning migrants that had cash and opportunities for generating *ganyu* in the villages, and Kanyamuka (2021) observed similar current migration trends albeit for semi or non-skilled menial jobs. Women deployed their agency to emancipate themselves by negotiating *ganyu* payment agreements upfront to avoid reciprocity expectations and ease moral responsibility and return of favours granted as social moral insurance to be returned at a future date (Bryceson 2006).

The other changes observed are that women are no longer the only key drivers of *ganyu,* even though they remain the majority of *ganyu* workers for supporting their households' food and other basics (Malawi Government 2020a). Men are also increasingly partaking in *ganyu*, albeit less for household food needs but for cash and own needs. Rural and urban households are now actively engaged in both on-farm and off-farm *ganyu* (Malawi Government 2020a). *Ganyu* is no longer only mobilising household food or protecting the poor households against extreme poverty and food shortage (Dimova et al., 2010a and 2010b) or providing a social risk management mechanism (Devereux 1999), but it is generating income for various other needs. The concept of *ganyu* has become too broad and loose such that many activities or straightforward casual labour transactions are now inevitably called *ganyu*.

Even though the concept of *ganyu* remains important and influential in different contexts and work settings, for purposes of understanding how local institutions work and the importance of social networks and communities' access to livelihoods in Malawi, there is a real conceptual risk in the widespread use of the concept across different disciplines. This leads to a lack of consensus over the meaning of *ganyu* if every piece of work within different contexts and terms becomes *ganyu*. Like social capital that Fine (2001) argues is fundamentally elusive due to the explanation of almost every social science phenomenon without critical analysis, the case of *ganyu* is not different. While *ganyu* may be a useful concept, its implications as a theory can be concerning because it is elusive, with no discipline that can impose an all-encompassing definition to capture what many users mean by it.

Given the frequent livelihood shocks and enduring economic challenges that occur in Malawi, *ganyu* employers are now more likely than before to optimise economic gain and opt for the lowest bidder. This helps them to accumulate whatever little wealth they can to cushion against the hardships and disagrees with Englund's (1996) argument that local *ganyu* hire from those in need of food is philanthropic and unselfish. However, despite its elusive and widespread use, *ganyu* remains an important concept and a widely practiced tradition in the different contexts that exchange farm produce, cash and labour for mutual benefit. *Ganyu* can still function as a social institution or what Bryceson (2006) called a changing etymology and meaning given its evolving ubiquitous nature and usage.

6. Conclusion

The practices, trends, and terms of *ganyu* continue to change depending on the emerging needs and livelihood threats faced by predominantly rural households even though urban *ganyu* is now a common feature of Malawian society. The paper explored the different dimensions and changing nature of *ganyu* as a livelihood coping strategy, even though some of them appear contradictory. The demand and supply of *ganyu* are shaped by complex factors including local and global transformations, environmental conditions, asset portfolios, power dynamics, and political influence. The concept of *ganyu* is robust and potentially useful as an academic concept even though it is elusive and lacks a specific disciplinary focus. As a result, *ganyu* means many different things that cannot be ignored by development practitioners and policymakers given its potential as a livelihood and food security strategy.

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