

Malawi has experienced a low steady level of COVID-19 infections. Dziwana Shawa shares her country's response. Dziwana is an Interim Actuarial Specialist with Old Mutual Malawi.

Highlight of Disease Status:

Population as at Mid 2020 ¹	19,129,952
Population Density per sq km	161.46
First Official Case	2 nd April 2020
Lockdown	Announced to start on 18 th April, 17 th High Court overruled it as such did not occur
Number of Days	N/A
Did Lockdown reduce New Cases?	N/A
Sufficient Capacity in Healthcare System	Yes
Cumulative Cases as at 30 Nov 2020	6,025
New Cases in Nov 20	102
New Cases Per 000 Population	0.0053
Case Fatality Ratio	3.07%

Preparedness

Malawi quickly recognised the seriousness of COVID-19 as a global outbreak. As a result, in February, the Government developed the COVID-19 Task Force before Malawi had registered any cases. The Task Force developed a plan to establish operational procedures for preparedness and response to COVID-19 based on risks identified by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The plan was multi-sectoral and aimed to ensure the following:

- Prevention of COVID-19 spread within the country
- Consistent and co-ordinated response in the event of COVID-19 outbreak
- A 'cluster system' approach, namely: Health, Inter-Cluster Coordination, Protection and Social Support, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (CASH), Education, Food Security, Transport and Logistics.

Cases

The first COVID-19 cases were confirmed on 2nd April by then President Peter Mutharika. These were the country's first three reported cases - Malawian nationals of Asian origin who had returned from India. Authorities immediately started contact tracing of individuals who had come into contact with these people, and quarantine protocols were put in place.

Civil Aviation suspended international flights on the same day. However, flights containing emergency relief, health personnel, essential equipment and other important items were exempted upon getting

¹ <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-data>

special clearance. Flights bringing cargo and residents also required screening, testing and disinfecting upon landing. Government quarantined international travellers.

A State of National Disaster was implemented banning travel. By 7th April, Malawi had registered 8 cases and 1 death.

Initial Response

On 7th April, the following COVID-19 measures were implemented :

- Suspending of entertainment, markets, public events and works; bottle stores, bars, weddings, sports facilities/events, eateries and funerals were limited to 50 participants
- Excluded were essential services; health sector, emergency services, utility services, veterinary services and crop harvesting
- Public sensitisation commenced through all mediums
- Mask wearing became mandatory

By this time all schools and universities had been closed – ordered on March 23rd. Likewise, public gatherings had been limited to 100 people. Security forces had been positioned to enforce the restrictions.

Failed Lockdown and Ongoing Safety Measures

On 8th April COVID-19 measures for the finance sector commenced. This included a three-month moratorium on loans, 50% fees reduction, suspension of bonuses, reclassification of loan facilities and Active Liquidity Assistance facility.

On the 14th of April a 21-day lockdown was announced effective at midnight of 18th April as cases had risen to 19, with two recorded deaths.

National COVID-19 response laws and guidelines were published.

On April 17th, the High Court of Malawi temporarily suspended the implementation of the proposed 21-day lockdown, pending judicial review. Reasons raised were:

- The government had failed to put in place measures ‘to cushion the poor during lockdown’ as they depend on ‘hand to mouth living’.
- The country was planning to hold a re-election from a previous election nullified by the High Court, and lockdown dates would delay the progression of the re-elections. The original election was riddled with many documented electoral discrepancies despite UN observers clearing the result. The subsequent re-run elections took place on 23rd June, as ordered by a High Court judgement.

The lockdown did not take place, but the COVID-19 measures were put in effect across the country and by 20th April all businesses in Malawi made it mandatory to wear a mask, social distance and sanitize upon entering their premises.

The Public Health COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Management Rules 2020 were published on 8th August and faced a wide range of criticism from the general public including religious bodies; Christian, Islamic and Hindu being the main groups. Despite this, the rule remains in place and COVID-19 cases have continued to fall. In September schools reopened with COVID-19 protocols in place. The

highest COVID-19 concentrations as at November have been in the main cities, namely Lilongwe and Blantyre.

Over 500 people have been arrested across the country for not wearing face masks, which is now mandatory. Failure by any person to wear a face mask in public is an offence that attracts a K10,000 (£100) fine upon conviction.

Health Sector Response to the COVID-19 Situation

By 28th June, a total of 20,725 people had been screened, resulting in reported cases of 1,224, causing fear in the country. The main concerns were 636 imported infections from returnees and deportees mainly from South Africa and 551 being locally transmitted. However, what was evident was the low death rate of 14 and high recovery rate of 260.

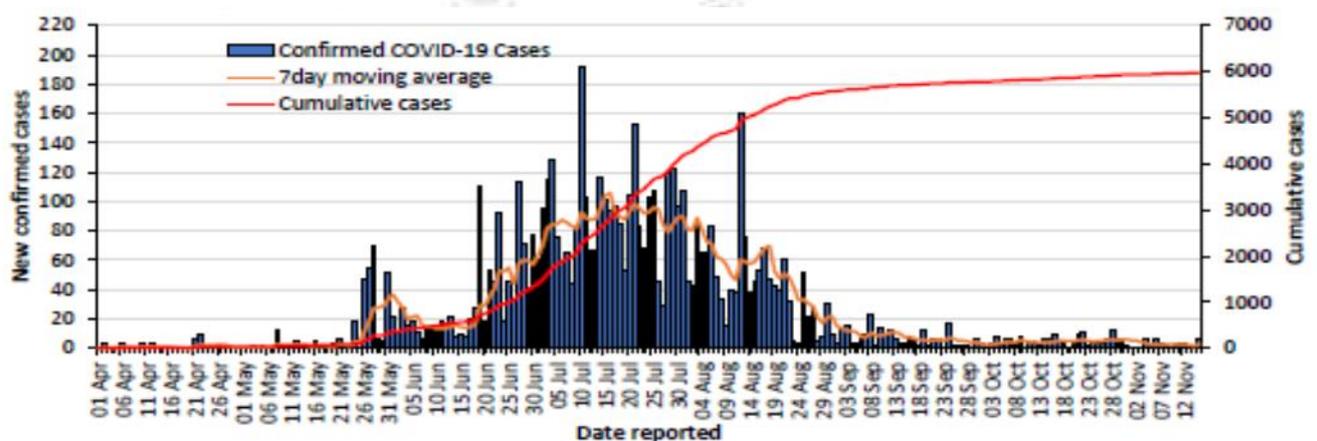
This was attributed to the healthcare system that is accustomed to managing potential pandemics and spreads in the country from dysentery, seasonal diarrhoea and many outbreaks which require similar protocols in management to COVID-19. This expertise and preparedness has assisted in managing the death rates in Malawi. UNICEF also provided key interventions in COVID-19 surveillance and coordination with funding from UK Aid which assisted in screening travellers at points of entry.

By 15th July COVID-19 cases had risen to a total of 2,430 and of these cases 1,560 were managed as out-patients and 577 had recovered, attesting to the readiness of the health sector.

Due to the steady management of the pandemic, on 15th August the president announced the opening of schools, colleges and universities to take place in early September. However, by 25th August, there were 5,423 confirmed cases with 3,066 recoveries and 170 deaths. This trend continued all through September and October, with active cases ranging from 350-414 and very few fatalities. In October there were no fatalities. By 30th November cumulative cases were at 6,025 with 185 deaths and 287 active cases.

Moving forward the Government has continued to enforce COVID-19 measures in the country and currently is working on continued response up to 2024, with partnerships with international and donor communities.

COVID-19 progression in Malawi



Source: UNICEF 2020

Map of Malawi showing distribution of COVID-19 cases

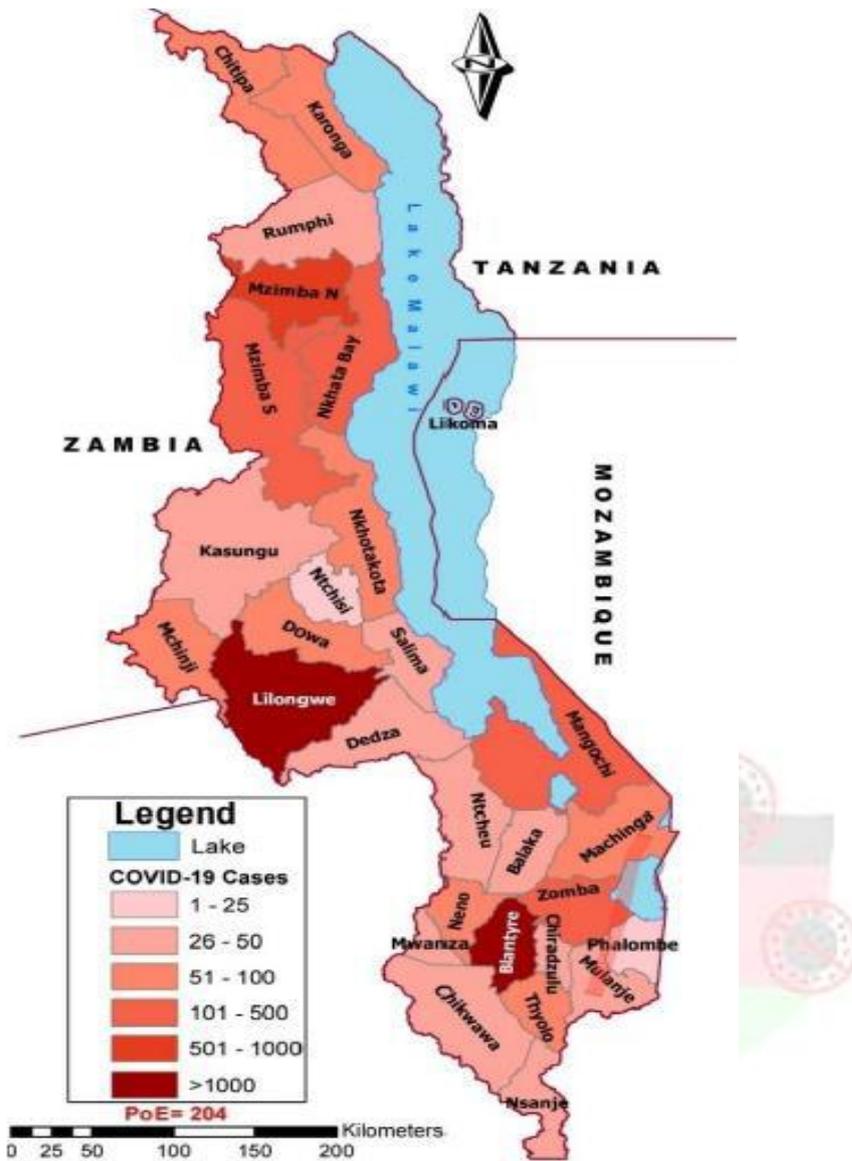


Figure 1: Map of Malawi showing distribution of COVID-19 cases

Source: UNICEF 2020

COVID-19
CORONAVIRUS