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Trends, past and contemporary update

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November 2025

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Abstract

Recent research shows that informal casual labour, locally called ganyu, is rapidly increasing in rural Malawi and is closely linked to urbanisation. Understanding the trends in ganyu, its interaction with other livelihood activities like smallholder farming, and its relationship with rising urbanisation is critical for effective policymaking in a context marked by high poverty, underemployment, fast population growth and subsistence farming with decreasing farm sizes.

However, up to date data on ganyu comes mainly from labour surveys, which are shown to be inadequate to capture informal labour, offering thus a limited and partial picture of its nature and dynamics. While older qualitative studies provide valuable insights, they are often outdated and fail to capture the evolving realities of ganyu.

This paper addresses these gaps by documenting current trends in ganyu, exploring its origins, and examining how its moral and social dimensions have evolved over time. Drawing on our own in-depth, field-collected data, we provide detailed descriptions of ganyu, including the types of tasks performed, payment structures, demographic participation, seasonal variations, and its broader social significance in contemporary Malawi. Compared to previous studies, our research recognizes that ganyu encompasses both agricultural and non-agricultural work, and pays special attention to its relationship with urbanisation.

This study makes several key contributions. First, it highlights the growing significance of ganyu as a livelihood strategy in Malawi, and it demonstrates its evolving social and economic nature. Second, it bridges qualitative and quantitative approaches, offering rich, contextual descriptions that enhance the interpretation and use of labour survey data. Third, it underscores the value of localized, qualitative insights in labour research. Finally, it identifies entry points for policymaking by providing a nuanced understanding of ganyu's role in rural and urban economies.

1. Introduction

Labour markets in Africa have been the subject of much discussion when it comes to finding sustainable pathways for growth and poverty reduction. With some countries transitioning to more industrialized and service jobs, the labour force on the continent remains predominantly agricultural. Much of this agricultural labour is dedicated to subsistence farming. The African labour market is also characterized by high, persistent informality, with 84.3 percent of the total workforce and 74.5 percent of the non-agricultural workforce working in informal employment (ILO, 2023). While some argue for the flexibility and adaptability of informal labour, others point out the dangers associated with it (Meagher, 2016).

Consistent with these broader trends observed across Africa, Malawi depends predominantly on smallholder rainfed agriculture. As a result, the country's labour calendar is characterized by high levels of seasonality and underemployment, mostly during the non-agricultural season (de Janvry et al., 2022; Wodon & Beegle, 2006). Despite this high reliance on farming, evidence from survey data shows that between 2010 and 2019 there has been a shift from own-farm to off-farm activities especially in the form of informal casual (ganyu) labour. This shift is accompanied by an increase in total hours worked and by a decline in labour seasonality (De Weerdt et al., 2024). A recent study that uses longitudinal survey data finds that those living closer to expanding urban areas are able to supply more hours of work, with a particular large increase in ganyu (Van Cappellen & De Weerdt, 2024). Both studies underscore the significant and increasing prevalence of ganyu in rural Malawi, with a parallel loss of work on the own farm. However, they provide no insight into the nature of ganyu or the specific

tasks involved, as the quantitative survey data used lack this information.

Given the increasing prevalence of ganyu and the new economic reality and policy challenges in current day Malawi, the limits of quantitative data, and the lacuna in recent qualitative literature, there is a need for a better qualitative understanding of ganyu from both an academic as well as policy perspective. The aim of this study is to explore in more detail what ganyu is, how it is perceived by the rural community, its interconnectedness with other income-generating activities and how it features in the larger context of socio-economic dynamics in the country. We provide a more thorough understanding of this particular, locally anchored type of casual labour, broadening the study to both farm and non-farm related activities conducted under the form of ganyu and, hence, escaping from the limitation of most of the existing literature that studies only farming-related ganyu. We also give particular attention to urban-rural linkages and their impact on rural individuals' income-generating activities, especially on ganyu. To fill this gap, we combine own-collected qualitative data with publicly available quantitative data.

Ganyu is formally described as a form of short-term informal daily labour which most commonly consists of piecework weeding or ridging on the fields of other smallholders or on agricultural estates (National Statistical Office, 2012). Despite this formal definition, it is important to acknowledge that the term is very broad and that it can cover different forms of casual labour associated to different tasks and different quantities of work, both in agriculture and outside of agriculture. In-depth studies on the nature of ganyu, which mostly focus on farming ganyu, reveal a transformation from a social mutually beneficial relationship among villagers to a market-driven, socially stratified form of short-term labour (Bezner Kerr, 2005; Bryceson, 2006; Englund, 1999; Whiteside, 2000). Studies researching the mechanism of ganyu underscore both its role as a social insurance mechanism against shocks and its link to poverty and food insecurity, highlighting the intricate interplay between ganyu and the broader socio-economic landscape, illustrating its complex integration into the fabric of the country's social and economic dynamics. The above-mentioned studies on ganyu in Malawi were conducted over often two decades ago and since then the Malawian context and, more broadly, that of sub-Saharan Africa have changed.

The population of the African continent has been increasing rapidly over the past decades, with an expected doubling between now and 2050 (OECD, 2020; UN, 2018). This growth is putting pressure on farmland, leading to the emergence of new smaller agglomerations, and sets in motion the rapid expansion of existing cities. This population growth has however seemingly not been accompanied with a restructuring of the labour market. When the growth of the working force does not happen alongside increased productivity or the creation of formal jobs in industry or manufacturing, it risks leading to high youth unemployment, a further deepening of informal (urban) jobs and 'disguised unemployment' (Meagher, 2016; Wuyts & Kilama, 2014). In the context of Malawi, population growth and land constraints are putting more pressure on land, leading to smaller plots and decrease soil fertility (Caruso & Cardona Sosa, 2022). Maize farming, the country's staple crop, is now virtually entirely fertilizer dependent, a reliance deeply intertwined with the historical and ongoing policy of subsidizing fertilizer, which stands as the foremost national development policy (Benson et al., 2024). Moreover, the rapid population growth and urbanisation process that Malawi is undergoing is undoubtedly shaping the employment structures in the country, both in urban and rural areas.

However, understanding African labour markets from a macro- and micro perspective depends on having appropriate data for accurate calculations. Subsistence agricultural labour and informal labour are notoriously challenging to precisely capture in household

surveys, and might result in biased estimates (Abay et al., 2023; Arthi et al., 2018; Gaddis et al., 2023; Kilic et al., 2023; Rizzo et al., 2015). Due to the biases that come with labour surveys, rural labour markets in Africa risk being not well understood. Complementary in-depth qualitative research on labour dynamics is thus desirable to understand African labour markets. Drawing on our own in-depth field-collected data, we find that ganyu is both deepening and expanding in scope. More tasks, particularly non-agricultural tasks, are increasingly done under ganyu arrangements. Moreover, nearby urbanisation is transforming the nature of ganyu agreements, as urban employers increasingly rely on rural ganyu workers. The emergence of these new ganyu hirers is leading to further commodification of ganyu, transforming it into an increasingly individual income earning strategy governed by the market, thereby putting pressure on the moral economy historically associated with ganyu. And while ganyu is generally a suboptimal income earning strategy, its manifestations and uses are multiple, attesting both to the fact that it can be a sign of distress and lead to structural poverty, yet it is also applied as a buffer against household shocks or needs for immediate cash.

Our findings can provide some entry points for policymaking. We argue that with the right policy measures, the urbanisation of Malawi can be leveraged to the advantage of the rural poor. Policymakers should direct attention to the prevalence of ganyu as a key employment strategy, paying close attention to its various forms and the underlying factors driving its prevalence. Additionally, efforts should focus on fostering an enabling environment for alternative off-farm employment opportunities, particularly through the promotion of small-scale businesses. We argue that household surveys should not only include local forms of informal labour but also tailor their questions to reflect the nature and specific characteristics of these labour arrangements, enabling more detailed quantitative analysis

The paper is structured as follows. The next section will provide an overview of the country context and the trends in ganyu and rural livelihoods in Malawi of the last decade, using national survey data. Section 3 will detail the qualitative data and methodology used for this study. Section 4 will give an overview of the meaning and description of ganyu in previous and current literature. Section 5 will then use our data to uncover the descriptives, social significance and evolving moral economy of ganyu in current day Malawi. Section 6 will discuss the findings and make some conclusions for policy and future work.

2. Ganyu in Malawi: trends over time

2.1. Country context

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 70 percent of the population living below the international poverty line of USD2.15[1] per day per capita (World Bank, 2023). Agriculture serves as the primary source of income for 80 percent of households, and 94 percent of the poor are living in rural areas (Benson, 2021; Caruso & Cardona Sosa, 2022). Rainfed subsistence agriculture with a single crop season has historically been the main livelihood strategy for most Malawian households to assure food security.

Despite being relatively densely populated with 211 people per km², Malawi is one of the least urbanised countries in Africa, with an official urbanisation rate of only 16 percent and just four recognised cities (UNPD, 2022). However, it is also one of the fastest urbanising nations on the continent, although recent years have seen a slight slowdown (Caruso & Cardona Sosa, 2022). According to remotely sensed data, the number of urban areas in Malawi with populations exceeding 10,000 grew dramatically, rising from just one in 1950 to 148 by

[1] Measured at 2017 purchasing power parity

2020. As a result, more than a third of the country's population now resides in areas that can be classified as urban (OECD/SWAC, 2024). However, with only 32 officially recognized urban areas—including cities, towns, bomas[2], and other designated settlements— much of Malawi's urbanisation as identified by the remotely sensed Africapolis database, occurs under the official radar (National Statistical Office, 2019).

The government of Malawi has acknowledged that the rapid urbanisation is currently lacking appropriate attention in terms of urban management, infrastructure development, and service delivery. To harness the potential of urbanisation for economic growth and to improve the livelihoods of the population, the government has developed a National Urban Policy and designated urbanisation as one of the three pillars of its latest long-term development strategy, Malawi 2063 (Government of Malawi, 2019; National Planning Commission, 2020).

However, fast population growth, together with small average plot size, a deterioration of soil fertility, a decrease in agricultural productivity, urban growth and vulnerability to climate change and extreme weather events is putting pressure on the land and livelihood of Malawian households (Asfaw et al., 2018; Benson, 2021; Benson & De Weerdt, 2023). It is thus important for households to find alternative labour opportunities off the land and for policy makers to address this new reality and overcome the new challenges it poses for poverty reduction (Benson & De Weerdt, 2023; Caruso & Cardona Sosa, 2022).

2.2. Trends over time using quantitative survey data

Before delving deeper into the historical and contemporary meaning and social significance of ganyu in Malawian society, we first examine what survey data reveals about trends in ganyu among rural individuals over time. The focus on rural individuals is due to ganyu's origin as a rural labour relationship, intended to address labour/land imbalances between farming households (Whiteside, 2000; see also the next section). It is also in the rural areas, compared to the urban areas, where hours worked in ganyu have increased the most over the years.

Standardised surveys are often based on international labour categories and streamlined survey practices, which have been shown to be an inadequate instrument to capture the peculiarities of local labour dynamics and accurately estimating smallholder farming productivity, especially in specific African contexts (Abay et al., 2023; Arthi et al., 2018; Kilic et al., 2023; Oya, 2013; Rizzo et al., 2015). As such, Kilic et al. (2023) show that the nature of implementation of a survey matters for the wage and self-employment data it produces. Rizzo et al. (2015) show that language and translation barriers lead to an underappreciation of rural wage employment in the case of Tanzania, which underscores the importance of using contextualised appropriate terminology to warn against the underrepresentation of rural wage labour in statistics as stressed by Oya (2013). Abay et al. (2023) and Arthi et al. (2018) show that measurement errors in labour surveys also arise for smallholder farming data, with consequences for productivity estimates.

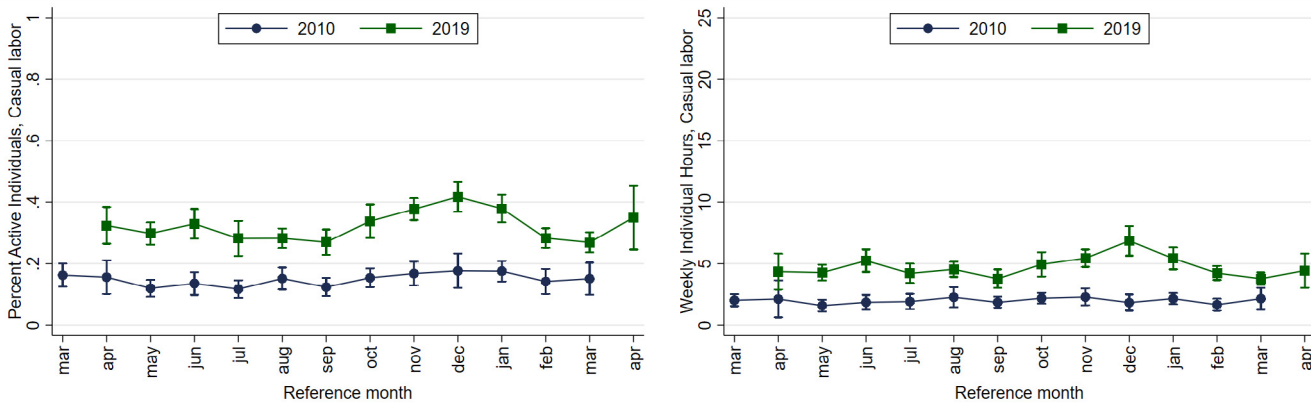
Notwithstanding these concerns, one advantage of the data that are used in this section can be cited. The Integrated Household Survey (IHS) and the Integrated Household Panel Survey (IHPS) are designed and implemented by the Malawian National Statistical Office with the support of the World Bank. They ask explicitly about engagement in ganyu. The English version of the questionnaire keeps the term *ganyu* to ask about hours spent in this activity, grouping it with casual and part-time labour. By adding this explicit reference to ganyu, the IH(P)S is making sure that rural casual work is not being neglected and that the locally embed-

[2] Boma is the terminology commonly used to refer to the second tier local governments which are almost always district capitals (Africapolis, n.d.).

ded term for temporary casual wage labour is safeguarded. The third and fifth round of the IHS and IHPS are used here to show the changes in ganyu supply between 2010 and 2019.

Figure 1 illustrates the supply of ganyu by month per rural working-age individual in both 2010 and 2019, using the cross-sectional IHS survey data (De Weerdt et al., 2024). The panel on the left-hand side shows the percentage of individuals engaged in ganyu by month. The panel on the right-hand side shows the estimated average weekly hours worked on ganyu by working-age individuals by month. From these figures it is evident that ganyu prevalence in the country has increased between 2010 and 2019. On the one hand, the percentage of individuals engaging in ganyu has gone up with time throughout the whole year. It is estimated that, on average, 35 percent of working-age individuals engaged in ganyu in 2010, whereas in 2019 this percentage grew to 59 percent. On the other hand, the average weekly hours worked in ganyu at the individual level has also increased over the years throughout the year. On average, in 2010, a working-age adult spent a total of 103 hours per year doing ganyu. In 2019, this figure increases, and it is estimated that individuals spent on average a total of 249 hours per year doing ganyu[3]. On the extensive margin (engagement), ganyu participation peaks from October to January. These months coincide with labour intensive months in the agricultural calendar (during land preparation and planting). On the intensive margin (hours worked), average weekly hours in ganyu were relatively stable throughout the year in 2010. By 2019, however, weekly hours spent in ganyu became more seasonal, peaking also from October to January. Hours worked in ganyu represented the 11.4% and the 25.2% of total hours worked in income-generating activities in 2010 and 2019, respectively. Between 2010 and 2019, hours worked in non-farm household enterprises also increased whereas hours worked on the own farm declined.

Figure 1. Level of engagement and hours spent in ganyu in rural Malawi by month, 2010 and 2019



Source: De Weerdt, Duquennois & Oliveres-Mallol (2024).

Van Cappellen and De Weerdt (2024) use the IHPS data to measure the association between changes in rural labour supply and urban growth for a panel of 1407 rural working age adults. It was found that a 10% increase in urban access is associated with an increase of 92 hours per year worked in ganyu, at the expense of hours worked on the own farm. It was also

[3] In urban areas, hours worked in ganyu by working-age individuals went from 142 hours in 2010 to 206 in 2019. Engagement in ganyu (in the 12 months prior to the interview) went from 19% in 2010 to 27% in 2019, suggesting that urban individuals are less likely to do ganyu but when they do, they work longer hours.

shown that there is an increasing trend among rural workers in Malawi towards combining different types of jobs, especially with ganyu. In 2019, around two-thirds of rural working-age adults reported working jobs in at least two different employment categories over the past year, while that number was 41 percent in 2010. However, working in ganyu, even combined with working on the own farm, which are the two most popular employment categories, does not allow the individuals to arrive at a working schedule as full as when working in wage labour or a non-farm enterprise (De Weerdt & Van Cappellen, 2023).

These analyses of the IHS and IHPS data show that ganyu is becoming more important in the labour portfolio of rural Malawians, and that there might be interesting interactions between engagement in ganyu and other labour categories, especially own farm work. It is a first indication that ganyu plays an important role in the current process of rural transformation and urbanisation happening in Malawi.

Despite having good-quality quantitative data that facilitates the investigation of rural employment, particularly causal labour, these data harbour certain limitations. The survey questionnaire does not ask which type of tasks the individuals perform under the umbrella of ganyu. In addition, the quantitative data offer no insights into the nature of ganyu, the underlying mechanisms behind the practice of ganyu, or the evolutionary trajectory of both its nature and mechanisms over time. Consequently, solely relying on quantitative data renders it impossible to discern the specificities of the changes in ganyu practices, the factors driving the recent surge in ganyu and the role of the ongoing urbanisation in Malawi in the process. This qualitative study was conducted specifically to address these challenges.

3. Data and methodology

3.1. Data collection

Qualitative data in the form of focus group discussions and life history interviews were collected in the period of February to April 2023. As we are interested in understanding the significance of ganyu for Malawi as a whole, a multiple case study design covering six locations spread out over the country was employed. Given the aforementioned rapid urbanisation of Malawi over the last decades and its links with ganyu, it was deliberately chosen to explicitly model rural-urban linkages. In each administrative region (North, Central and South), one city or town of interest was selected4, and consequently one nearby and one further away village was selected for data collection. Each region exhibits distinct characteristics. The Northern region stands out as the richest and less populated region, which implies a larger average land size per capita, lower population density and, consequently, less pressure on land. The Central region, though not as wealthy as the Northern region, benefits from its proximity to Lilongwe, the capital. Maize, the staple crop of Malawi, is the predominant crop cultivated in this region. It has a higher population density than the Northern region. Lastly, the Southern region is the poorest region, characterised by high prevalence of HIV, small per capita land sizes, high population density and a more diverse crop cultivation pattern. In the Northern region we visited Rumphi district, in the Central region Kasungu district, and in the Southern region Machinga district (see Figure 2).

The period of data collection, February to April, falls in the midst of the rainy

[4] The towns of interest were selected in consultation with IFPRI Malawi. The initial idea was to focus on the prospective secondary towns, as these are the urban agglomerations identified by the government to become secondary cities in light of their most recent long-term development plan, called Malawi 2063. In this light, we selected Liwonde in the South and Kasungu in the Central region. In the Northern region however, it was decided to focus on Rumphi, since it was deemed more representative for the region as a whole than the two prospective secondary towns in the region (Karonga and Nkhata Bay).

season and precedes the busy agricultural period of harvesting, which usually starts mid-April (Kamanga, 2002; Wodon & Beegle, 2006). The months leading up to the harvest are when households face the highest risk of food insecurity, as their food stocks are depleted, making them more likely to engage in ganyu. For the in-depth data collection phase (as described below), data collection started in the South, followed by the Central region and finally the North. This order was followed because the rainy season tends to end first in the South, and a degree of comparability in the collected data across different regions was sought to be maintained.

Figure 2. Data collection locations

Source: Own design.

Note: from North to South: Rumphi district with Rumphi town, Kasungu district with Kasungu town, and Machinga district with Liwonde town.

The target population consisted of working-age adults, including both men and women. Working-age adults are defined as individuals aged between 15 and 65 years old who report that they are not attending school[5].

The data collection consisted of two phases. The first month consisted of the explorative phase during which we got acquainted with the environment and people, got in contact with the local (traditional) authorities to get the necessary permissions, and held formal and informal conversations to gain insights into the main characteristics and drivers of ganyu in the selected urban areas and surrounding rural areas. Additionally, a total of 22 focus group discussions were conducted with individuals engaged in ganyu and five interviews were conducted with those who hire ganyu. These focus group discussions and interviews were held to get a descriptive understanding of the general socio-economic characteristics of the location, the patterns of ganyu in the particular location throughout the year, the links with urbanisation, and the possible changes over time in those aspects. Respondents were asked about tasks considered ganyu, payment methods and amounts, and which demographic groups are involved in what ganyu tasks. These questions were systematically and consistently asked for each month of the year to gain insights on the seasonal patterns of ganyu. Community information about land holding and prevalent economic activities provide contextualisation of the descriptives. The part that looks at ganyu retrospectively aids in identifying changes, and probes about hired-hirer relationships. Explicit attention is paid to rural-urban linkages in all sections, and one section asks specifically about different aspects of the connection with the nearest town[6].

During the in-depth phase, which spanned approximately two months, the six villages were visited. Each village was visited for about two weeks, during which one researcher

[5] While we know from the literature and survey data that it is common practice in Malawi for children to be involved in casual labour, a conscious decision was made not to conduct individual interviews with individuals below the age of 15 due to ethical considerations. It has to be acknowledged that, despite our discouragement, there may have been instances where an individual below the age of 15 was present during focus group discussions, since personal data was not collected. For the life history interviews it was also decided to include, in some instances, participants above the age of 65 years to be able to capture long-term changes in livelihood strategies, as well as in the community in general.

[6] These discussions, conducted in the local language, typically lasted around two hours each. The data from the focus group discussions were collected anonymously. The recordings were then transcribed into English for further analysis.

accompanied by a research assistant lived and slept in the village to get an understanding of the local context. 15 individual in-depth life history interviews were conducted in each village. The life histories interviews were designed to capture all the income-generating activities in which the respondent had been engaged throughout their life, as well as information on their education, marriage, household composition, migrations moves, land owned and cultivated (currently and in the past), self-evaluated wellbeing and prospects for the future[7]. The main part of the interview was to document the income-generating activities the respondent engaged in. We first probed into all the ways of making a living the respondent had over the course of their lifetime. We then went over them one-by-one and systematically asked about the motivation for doing this activity; when and why the respondent started and, if applicable, stopped with the activity; the temporal, spatial, network and payment characteristics; working conditions; and important turning points. It was consistently asked for each income earning activity if and what the government should do to improve the practice of the activity for the respondent. Inquiring systematically about all ways of making a living was designed to provide an understanding of the relative significance of ganyu at the individual level. Again, the rural-urban linkages receive explicit attention by asking about physical movement throughout the interview, whether it is in the framework of migration, for any income generation activity, or in function of visiting markets. At the very end of the interview, the respondent is asked to explain what ganyu means, in their own words.

The life history questionnaire was especially designed to facilitate a link with the IH(P)S questionnaire by maintaining categories of activities and value scales used in the surveys. The combination of survey data, focus group discussions and life history data aims at bringing etic and emic data in conversation which each other as to come to a fuller understanding of ganyu in contemporary Malawi. Emic data are "discursive data and social representations" (Olivier de Sardan, 2015, p. 78) and will be instilled mainly from the life history data and to a lesser extent the focus group discussions. Emic data provide us with a contextualised, localised representation of the meaning of ganyu as "it evokes the meanings that social facts have for the actors concerned" (Olivier de Sardan, 2015, p. 64). Etic data on the other hand are "observational data and inventories" (Olivier de Sardan, 2015, p. 78). They understand the researched world by translating observations to scientifically derived categorisation and taxonomies. Etic understandings of ganyu will be derived from the descriptions and observations of ganyu that arise from the qualitative data, combined with the IH(P)S survey data.

The respondents were selected in consultation with the local authority figure, often the village headman or headwoman, based on information gathered during the exploratory phase and sampled using purposive and snowball sampling[8]. In practice, this meant that we aimed to construct a sample that represents diverse array of livelihood strategies and experiences, thereby painting a representative picture of the social and economic landscape. This meant focusing not only on individuals engaged in ganyu with varied profiles, but also on small business owners, large landowners, landless individuals, and elderly community members with rich recollections of village history.

[7] All life history interviews were conducted in the local language and typically lasted about two hours. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed into English. While the interviews were not conducted anonymously, the names of the individuals and villages have been kept confidential and are not publicly disclosed.
[8] Purposive sampling is a group of noun-probability sampling techniques that selects cases to be included in the sample because of certain characteristics or a specific purpose. Examples can be contrast cases, typical cases or quotas. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which a key informant or sample member identifies additional members to be included in sample (Bickman & Rog, 2008).

3.2. Data descriptives

Table 1 shows some sample characteristics of the data collection sites. When comparing the sample with IHS 2019/20 data, we see that our respondents are, not surprisingly given the target population of working age (or retired) adults, older than the general population. In terms of household composition and education, the sample mirrors pretty well the general IHS sample.

The share of individuals engaged in different income-generating activities is also studied. The data collection was designed to allow a link between our data and the IHS data. Hence, the income-generating activities were divided into four categories: working on the own farm, ganyu, household business, and wage employment. In 2023, the year of the interview, most of the participants (93%) were involved in own-farming, 56% of the participants were engaged in ganyu, 41% in business and only 9% were engaged in wage employment. These figures are similar to the values obtained with the IHS5 data for 2019/2020, except for business. Whereas we observe that almost 40% of the participants are involved in business in the three districts together, according to IHS5 only 16% of the population in these three districts are engaged in business. This could be the case because during the data collection, selling farm input was also considered a business, or due to the timing of the interview, since businesses are often highly seasonal. However, it is important to keep in mind that the sample was not selected to be statistically representative.

Table 1. Descriptives of sample locations

District	Kasungu		Machinga		Rumphi		Total Sample	IHS 2019/20 (rural in-div.)
	Nearby	Faraway	Nearby	Faraway	Nearby	Faraway		
Village								
Distance to town	9.7	34	8.6	76	8.5	75	/	/
Approx. number of hhs	72	400	700	30	9	46	/	/
Gender								
Women	7	8	8	8	7	7	45 (50%)	52.1%
Men	8	7	7	7	8	8	45 (50%)	47.9%
Marital status								
Divorced	2	3	1	1	2	4	13 (14%)	7.4%
Married	12	9	12	12	8	10	63 (70%)	48.1%
Single	0	0	0	0	3	1	4 (4%)	38.8%
Widow	1	3	2	2	2	0	10 (11%)	5.7%
Hh size								
Av. hh size	5.93	3.43	4.29	4	4.4	6.27	4.72	5.43
Med. hh size	6	3	4	4	4	7	4.5	5
Min hh size	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
Max hh size	13	6	6	8	10	10	13	22
Age								
Average age	48.87	46.13	49.47	52.27	48.93	43	48.1	22
Median age	43	43	44	57	46	37	43.5	16
Min age	23	25	23	23	21	20	21	0
Max age	99	75	75	73	81	74	99	118
Education								
No education	5	6	11	12	7	2	43 (48%)	58%
Primary educ.	7	7	1	3	5	8	31 (34%)	33%
Secondary educ.	1	2	2	0	2	4	11 (12%)	9%
Tertiary educ.	0	0	1	0	1	0	2 (2%)	0%
Unknown	2	0	0	0	0	1	3 (3%)	0%
Income earning activities. Engaged in:								
Own-farm	14	15	14	15	13	13	84 (93%)	90%
Ganyu	8	6	11	8	10	7	50 (56%)	60%
Business	6	9	3	6	6	7	37 (41%)	16%
Wage labour	1	1	1	2	1	2	8 (9%)	7%
Land								
Av. ha hh land	3.67	2.34	1.16	1.11	2.54	1.04	2.01	0.75
Av. ha hh land/pc	0.54	0.80	0.27	0.32	0.77	0.19	0.48	0.18

Source: Own compilation.

The average land owned and/or cultivated per household in our sample is 2.01 hectares in all three districts together. However, there are differences between regions. In Kasungu, households own more land (3.03 ha), followed by Rumphi (1.82 ha) and finally by Machinga (1.14 ha). This is considerably higher than the average for the general population, which is 0.75 hectares. Two possible reasons can be cited. Firstly, the deliberate inclusion of large landowners in each region aimed to ensure a diverse representation of socioeconomic profiles within the sample. However, due to the relatively small sample size per location (15 individuals), this approach might have resulted in an overrepresentation of individuals with large land holdings. Note that the median land size in our sample is 1.11 hectare, which is much closer to the national average and thus shows the presence of a few big landowners. Secondly, our data on household land relies on self-reported size, whereas the IHS data relies on plot sizes measured with GPS. Self-reported land size estimates have been shown to be prone to systematic error (Carletto et al., 2015), which could also be at the basis of the observed differences between our data and the IHS data. Indeed, respondents often expressed doubts over the exact land size or expressed it in meter-by-meter sizes, in number of ridges, or sometimes in vague descriptions such as 'big' or 'small'. However, what is consistent with the survey data is that households in Kasungu generally own and/or cultivate more land on average, whereas Machinga remains the district with the least land per household. Average household land per capita reveal the same pattern. These land patterns confirm that the Southern region suffers more from land scarcity than the other regions.

3.3. Methodological approach

The data collection was designed with a broad exploratory aim, driven by two primary objectives: first, to gain a comprehensive understanding of ganyu, including its outward manifestations or descriptors; and second, to investigate the dynamics behind the observed increase in ganyu as reflected in the quantitative data. This necessitated a deeper understanding of ganyu's significance for individuals and its embeddedness within the socio-economic context.

Given the exploratory nature of this study concerning the contemporary significance of ganyu in Malawi, we opted for an inductive data analysis method. As put by Flick (2013, p. 130), "Induction observes individual parts of the unique diversity of the world and attempts to determine rules and laws to order its infinite manifestations."

To establish a descriptive overview of the sample, several key variables were extracted from the data, such as age, sex, household composition, land roster, duration of farming and other income-generating activities, satisfaction rankings, among others. These variables were organised into a table to facilitate descriptive analysis and basic statistical manipulations. Subsequently, NVivo was employed to code the English transcripts of the life history interviews and focus group discussions. Multiple coding cycles were conducted to identify structures, categories, descriptions, concepts and themes. These codes, combined with the descriptives variables, facilitated the extraction of insights into the descriptive patterns, evolution, and nuanced dynamics of ganyu from the data. The subsections of Section 5 provide a detailed explanation of how the data was analysed and utilized to arrive at the findings presented.

This section described the data collection strategy that was followed, the basic descriptives of the sample, and the methodology of the study. Before delving into the analysis of the data in Section 5, the following section will give an overview of the practice and significance of ganyu, from previous literature until now.

4. GANYU IN THE LITERATURE: PAST AND PRESENT

4.1. Origins and social significance of ganyu

The concept of ganyu dates back to Malawi's colonial era. Malawi has a long and rich history of migration of various ethnic groups into the region, resulting in significant ethnic blending (Bryceson, 2011). During the colonial era, European plantation owners sought to recruit labour for their estates, primarily situated in the Southern region of then-Nyasaland. They initially demanded labour service, instead of rental payments, from the local population residing on their estates. This intended labour arrangement replicated the tribute labour that until then Malawian villagers had been offering to their chief in exchange for protection. Nonetheless, the local population responded with resistance to these demands. Consequently, Lomwe migrants from what is now Mozambique, commonly referred to as Anguru in Malawi, were attracted to work in the plantations by this premise. These migrants sought refuge from harsh taxation policies in their homelands under Portuguese colonial rule, and were attracted by the relatively better agricultural opportunities in Malawi. In exchange for their labour on the estates, these migrants were allocated land by the planters for subsistence production. This labour arrangement, known as *thangata*, could entail in practice labour commitments of up to six months per year. Owing to the migrants' limited bargaining power and the entrenched influence of the plantation owners through the local chiefs, the terms and working conditions grew harsher over time and *thangata* became exploitative labour. However, with the abolition of slavery and subsequent independence, the practice of *thangata* as forced labour gradually waned (Bryceson, 2006).

The practice of ganyu, that emerged around the same time as *thangata*, was however a vastly different labour arrangement. Originally, the term ganyu—derived from the Portuguese word *ganyao*, meaning bonus—referred to a voluntary and mutually beneficial labour exchange between those Mozambican migrants, the Anguru, and the local population, mainly the indigenous Yao chiefs. In exchange for labour tasks such as bush clearance, the Anguru were compensated with cash or in-kind payments (Bryceson, 2006; White, 1987). Initially coined to describe these particular inter-ethnic exchanges, ganyu gradually evolved into a more general term to denote all mutually beneficial labour exchanges between rural households (Bryceson, 2006).

Ganyu became a form of labour to which rural households regularly resorted (Bryceson, 2006; Vaughan, 1987). Whiteside (2000) contends that the original form of ganyu consisted of neighbours or relatives that would take turn working in group, on each other's fields or in non-agricultural tasks such as constructing a house, for beer or food in return. Households with scarcity of labour and/or excess of land could rely on hired ganyu, whereas households with labour excess could rent out their labour. In practice, the better-off were hiring ganyu and the poorer households were working. Hence, contributing to widening wealth imbalances between the two parties in the labour exchange, rather than showcasing an egalitarian relationship (Bryceson, 2006). Soon, ganyu was attributed a moral nature (Bryceson, 2006; Englund, 1999). It transformed from a reciprocity-based communal relationship into a patron-client relationship, wherein better-off households feel morally obligated to hire the poorer households in need of food or money. Englund (1999) defends that "the *ganyu* labour arrangements are integral to the constitution of economic actors as moral persons" (p. 137). It was understood that wealthier households should not only be concerned about their own capital accumulation, but should also take into account others' wealth by, for instance, providing access to food and cash to 'poorer' villagers through ganyu. When self-interest and individual-

ism prevailed instead, villagers attributed the wealth's creation to witchcraft, opposing to the notion of moral being (Englund, 1999).

Over time, ganyu came to be seen both as a livelihood strategy and as an indicator of vulnerability (Bezner Kerr, 2005), or as Bryceson (2006) puts it, "a way of life" (p. 189). Ganyu emerged as a critical source of income for households with limited alternatives, yet it simultaneously reinforced their vulnerability to food insecurity. This shift in the nature of ganyu was accompanied by an excess of ganyu supply and limited demand, further eroding ganyu labourers' bargaining power prioritizing the hirers' interests, such as capital accumulation. Multiple factors have contributed to this change. In the past, rural households were able to complement their agricultural production with income from waged labour. Cash was obtained by, mostly, men working as migrants in South-African mines and from the 1970s onwards by working in Malawian estates. These labour opportunities slowly faded from the 1990s onwards due to declining commodity prices in the international markets. As a result, rural households were forced to engage in ganyu to obtain the cash they needed (Bezner Kerr, 2005). This reality was worsened due to land scarcity, and the already wide gap between the hirers' and the labourers' wealth. The famine in 2001-02 and the HIV/AIDS crisis did only accentuate these tendencies, which led even more people to resort to ganyu. Thus, "(t)he historical tension between ganyu's moral relational content and its role in rural factor exchange has been tipped in favour of the latter" (Bryceson, 2006, p. 198). The longitudinal studies of Peters show that the poorest and most vulnerable households are the ones resorting to ganyu, making up for depleted food stock by working in ganyu for sometimes up to months a year (Peters, 1996).

In summary, the evolution of ganyu, as depicted in previous literature, reflects a significant transformation from its origins in the colonial era to the onset of the 21st century. While ganyu originated as a form of social mutually beneficial relationship among villagers, it transformed to a patron-client relationship among a community of socially stratified smallholders. As such, it progressively shifted towards a way of life and marketised form of short-term informal labour. Thus, ganyu has evolved from having a social, communal nature to having an economic nature, deeply entrenched within the history of colonial and postcolonial policies and realities (Bezner Kerr, 2005; Whiteside, 2000).

While the aforementioned historical in-depth studies clearly depict a social stratification linked to ganyu labour agreements, previous and more recent studies are inconclusive about the nature of the instrumentality and the extent of the social function of ganyu in the 21st century. Early studies argue that ganyu plays a role of a social safety net, in the sense that by hiring and working on ganyu individuals reinforce social ties and build social capital from which they may benefit in the future (Englund, 1999; Mtika, 2001). Another narrative stressed in the literature is that ganyu is used as a coping mechanism against food insecurity and vulnerability (Bezner Kerr, 2005; Bryceson, 2006; Whiteside, 2000). It is argued that individuals who work on ganyu are mostly people that are experiencing food insecurity, which they usually do during the rainy season when one should also be working on their own land. As a result, as ganyu wages are low and as households are neglecting their own-farm production, it is likely that these households will need to do ganyu the following year too. It is, hence, argued that ganyu leads households to a vicious circle of food insecurity and poverty which contributes to perpetuate inequality (Peters, 2006). Dimowa et al. (2010) find instead that ganyu plays a role of insurance against shocks in the absence of insurance markets. Rather than leading households to a vicious cycle, the authors find that engaging in ganyu is a rational choice. Orr et al. (2009) investigate the provision of ganyu as a form of poverty trap in the Southern region. Contrary to their own expectations and to previous literature, the authors find that in the study area the provision

of ganyu is not correlated with poverty. Instead, they argue that engagement in ganyu is part of a diversified livelihood strategy which contributes to households' resilience to shocks. The literature also hints that women and female-headed households rely more on ganyu and that their wage is typically lower compared to men, and it is noted that ganyu is also common among children and young adults (Bezner Kerr, 2005; Bryceson, 2006; Whiteside, 2000).

However, Whiteside (2000) noted that different labour models may determine ganyu supply decision making, depending on the timing in the year or the fact that it was a poor harvest year or not. This might well explain why some studies find that ganyu supply can be stabilising, while others mainly find evidence for the downward spiral of neglecting own farm work and food insecurity. Dimowa et al. (2010) also show that there are different relationships possible between ganyu supply and ganyu wage, so that the neoclassical model of efficient resource allocation fails to predict ganyu supply behaviour when it is motivated by other things than a simple efficient resource allocation, such as the social insurance function or a subsistence constraint. They argue that the same household might follow different ganyu supply strategies, and that different households might motivate their ganyu supply with different reasons or arguments. Englund (1999) also already noted the complex ways in which ganyu relations are embedded in a constantly changing social and economic world.

The recent studies of Bouwman et al. (2021); Gono et al. (2023) both conceptualise ganyu as a coping mechanism against poverty and food insecurity, recognising its role within a broader systemic framework where land, labour, diverse livelihood strategies and social stratification interact and mutually influence one another. Gono et al. (2023) argue that ganyu is not always effective as a coping strategy and further investigate the characteristics of rural individuals that participate in ganyu, either by working in ganyu, employing ganyu or both, and how this contributes to food insecurity and poverty. They find that resources in the form of land and labour as well as the activities in which individuals engage are determinant for ganyu supply and demand. In the interest of studying socioeconomic implications of herbicide use in rural Malawi, Bouwman et al. (2021) find that herbicide use, while decreasing farm costs, has a negative impact on the availability of agricultural ganyu opportunities and thus depriving vulnerable individuals of an important coping strategy, whereas the better off benefit from it.

These multiple insights underscore the dynamic and complex nature of ganyu, which continually evolves in response to the prevailing social and economic landscape. Factors such as famines, the HIV epidemic, shifting agricultural conditions, governance and policy changes, all contribute to the complex way in which ganyu is woven into the livelihoods and food security of rural Malawians. The role of ganyu in a current context of mounting uncertainty and instability in markets, climate change and extreme weather events, rising food and input costs, and the persistent trend of urbanisation thus warrant a similarly nuanced approach.

4.2. Current studies and classification of ganyu

While ganyu is widespread in present-day Malawi, its exact definition and scope remains relatively underdocumented in recent literature, resulting in varying classifications in studies investigating labour dynamics or rural livelihoods in Malawi. The National Statistical Office of Malawi, who coordinates the IH(P)S, defines ganyu as "short-term labor hired on a daily or other short-term basis. Most commonly, piecework weeding or ridging on the fields of other smallholders or on agricultural estates. However, ganyu labour can also be used for non-agricultural tasks, such as construction and gardening" (National Statistical Office, 2012, p. 48), thus stressing the short-term nature of ganyu and acknowledging that it is not constrained to agriculture. In his study on ganyu written over two decades ago, Whiteside (2000)

also acknowledged the broad spectrum of ganyu's coverage and characteristics, defining it as any rural labour off the own farm, not exclusively limited to agricultural tasks. He observed that ganyu encompasses various types that serve multiple social functions. Englund (1999) also acknowledged the possibility of ganyu being non-agricultural.

Recent studies however are not unanimous on their classification of ganyu in terms of type or sector of labour. Most of the studies still assume that ganyu is primarily agricultural labour. Some of them do so implicitly, as they focus more on the social significance of ganyu (Dimowa et al., 2010; Goldberg, 2016; Orr et al., 2009). Others do so explicitly, when making sectoral comparisons (Kilic et al., 2023; McCullough, 2017; Ricker-Gilbert, 2014; Van den Broeck & Kilic, 2019)[9]. Other focus mainly on the juxtaposition of ganyu as a labour agreement that happens off the own farm (Bouwman et al., 2021; Camara & Savard, 2023; Sitienei et al., 2014). de Janvry et al. (2022) add to that distinction a third category, distinguishing labour on the own farm, regular wage-paying labour and ganyu labour. The recent study of Gono et al. (2023) on ganyu and food security does acknowledge the existence of many forms of labour that are considered ganyu, differing in the type of activity, the mode of payment, the interval of payment and the amount of work done.

A comprehensive analysis of the payment structures, duration, and other specific attributes of ganyu, how they are embedded within both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors and how they vary geographically, remains notably absent in recent literature. Since its inception, ganyu has held a pivotal role in rural livelihoods. Moreover, as demonstrated in the preceding section, its significance is on the rise and there are indications it is affected by the ongoing urbanisation process. Acquiring a deeper understanding of its nature is thus an important step towards unravelling the process of rural transformation in Malawi.

5. Ganyu in contemporary Malawi

In this section, the collected data will be used to establish and analyse the meaning and social significance of ganyu in current day Malawi. They will be brought into conversation with the notions around ganyu from previous literature as explored above. Both the focus group discussions as well as the individual life history interviews allow us to get an understanding of ganyu that is contextualised on both the individual and community level, and that offers a temporal understanding due the dynamic, retro- and prospective nature of the questionnaire.

5.1. Descriptive patterns

Ganyu is well entrenched all over Malawi: according to IHS in the 2019/20 wave, 53.5% of all rural working age individuals worked at least one hour over the past twelve months in ganyu. In our sample, 56% of the individuals were doing ganyu at the time of the interview, while 86% of the individuals reported doing ganyu at least once over their lifetime.

We observe that a wide range of activities falls under the umbrella of ganyu. While many of these activities are related to farming, others are not. Agricultural ganyu is employed throughout the whole agricultural season, starting with clearing the land in September, to making ridges starting in November, weeding in January and harvesting starting as from April. Post-harvest tasks, such as winnowing and shelling maize or beans, are also done under ganyu arrangements. Tobacco farming, the main cash crop in Malawi, is more often done through contract farming or tenant arrangements, but certain tasks, such as *tying of hands*[10] or making

[9] Van den Broeck and Kilic (2019) assume, based on own fieldwork, that ganyu takes place in agriculture in rural areas, and in industry for urban man and in services for urban women, a classification followed by Kilic et al. (2023).
[10] Tying of hands refers to the process of bundling tobacco leaves together in preparation for curing

tobacco sheds, can be done through ganyu arrangements. Particularly common non-agricultural ganyu tasks are construction work such as making bricks, building houses, and constructing pit latrines. These activities are particularly important during the dry season (May-September) when fewer opportunities for agricultural labour are available. Despite being more prevalent in these months, the opportunities in non-agricultural ganyu are fewer than opportunities in farming ganyu during the agricultural calendar. Ganyu arrangements for non-agricultural tasks were seen to be more prevalent for the villages in closer proximity to a town or city. Especially in the villages near town, ganyu arrangements between hirers from surrounding urban areas and villagers take place. These arrangements are both for agricultural tasks, often on land that the urban residents rent nearby, but also for non-agricultural tasks. These non-agricultural tasks are often related to urbanisation, such as construction, brick making, or wheelbarrow transport.

The broad range of activities classified as ganyu demonstrates that ganyu is not limited to a specific set of tasks; potentially, all activities can be undertaken under a ganyu arrangement. Annex Table 1 in Annex gives an overview of activities done per month and per region, as listed by the respondents of the focus group discussions[11].

For most activities, both men and women participate. However, physically demanding tasks such as making tobacco sheds, construction work, tree cutting, charcoal burning, unloading trucks, tying lonas, digging pit latrines, and slashing were reported to be primarily performed by men. Conversely, activities like winnowing, clothes washing, mopping, vegetable leaf drying, and maize shelling were predominantly carried out by women. Fishing was also primarily a male task, while fish drying was mainly undertaken by women. Regarding brickmaking and construction work, although men were typically in charge, it was mainly women who transported water to the construction sites. The division of ganyu activities by gender appears to reflect the traditional gender roles in Malawian society. Children were also mentioned as taking part in ganyu, mostly for farm-related activities. Often, they accompanied their mother or caretaker for their ganyu assignments, but there were instances where children conducted their own ganyu tasks. For example, during our fieldwork, we observed children sorting beans.

Payments are always done on a piecework basis, meaning one is paid after finishing a specific task. These tasks can range from one that would take a few hours (washing clothes) to taking days or even weeks, such as weeding a big piece of land. Especially for bigger agricultural tasks, it is common to share a ganyu one obtained with others (peers, friends, family) and then share the payment according to contribution. Payments for ganyu can be made in both cash and in-kind, depending on what the hirer has available and in discussion with the ganyu worker. In-kind payments typically involve maize flour, but during pumpkin harvesting months, pumpkins may also be used as a form of payment. There are a few instances in which other in-kind payment types have been mentioned, such as clothes. In-kind (food) payments are especially common during periods of food scarcity, such as in the months leading up to the harvest (February – May). In-kind payments are however always said to be matched to the equivalent of the item at the prevailing market price, something already observed by Peters (2006). There seems to be more or less a consensus on the established prices per (agricultural) season, per task, in a certain area, for a certain determined piecework. In construction for example, payments are done per brick, usually divided between the one moulding the brick

the tobacco.

[11] The monthly ganyu calendars drawn during the focus group discussions were extracted from the transcripts and organised by region. These information rich calendars serve as the primary source for the descriptive analysis presented in this section. Additionally, the NVivo codes pertaining to characteristics and practices surrounding ganyu offer valuable insights that complement the descriptives, enriching the interpretation of the data.

(often a man) and the one carrying the water (often a woman). For agricultural tasks, the prices range according to the crop cultivated and the task done. For example, banding and weeding is more time and labour intensive than planting, and thus a higher price per acre/determined piecework is observed. In general, prices are highest in the Northern region and lowest in the Southern region. While in the North and Central region the unit of piecework for agricultural tasks is almost exclusively an acre, in the Southern region other units of measurement, such as 10*10 meter field or number of ridges was more commonly used to determine ganyu payment. As mentioned above, the Southern region is the poorest as well as most densely populated region, which could explain the smaller piecework sizes and lower payments.

Although ganyu arrangements can cover farming as well as non-farming tasks, most ganyu listed by the focus group discussants as well as the ganyu tasks performed by the life history interview respondents were linked to agricultural activities. Combined with the strong seasonality of the Malawian economy, caused by the large dependence on rainfed agriculture, more ganyu opportunities are available during busy agricultural periods, such as when the land is prepared or during/right after harvesting months (Benson & De Weerdt, 2023). The relative power over setting the payment by the hirer thus also shifts according to the agricultural calendar. In the busy agricultural months, payments were said to be higher, since untimely crop management is linked to reduced yields (Chambers et al., 1981). However, in general, it is clear from our data that ganyu supply outstrips demand, and that the hirer has relative power over wage setting. This has been an enduring characteristic of ganyu, mentioned in previous studies as far back as that of White (1987). In practice, this entails that it is mostly the ganyu worker that has to look for someone to give them ganyu, while those hiring ganyu can usually find ganyu workers through word of mouth. Additionally, when someone is in need of immediate cash, they will accept any payment: '*They will give you the place to work and then you receive the money less than your challenges. Ganyu is like a lottery game*'[12]. This is aggravated in the months or weeks leading up to the harvest, when '*hunger is at the maximum*' and '*it is the time when ganyus are beginning to be scarce and these are the last ones that are found. Whether you like it or not, you have to take them*'.[13] This aligns with the findings of Goldberg (2016) who demonstrates through a field experiment that labour supply elasticity in the day labour market in rural Malawi is low, regardless of observable characteristics. Additionally, Gono et al. (2023) observe that not all individuals have the opportunity to engage in as much high-paying ganyu as they would like.

Based on these descriptions, it can be inferred that ganyu is a prevalent custom among rural communities, encompassing a diverse array of activities. These activities span both agricultural and non-agricultural domains, varying in duration from short-term to longer-term engagements. Moreover, individuals from all demographic backgrounds participate in ganyu. While payment rates are generally established, they remain highly contingent on contextual factors, particularly the seasonal fluctuations within Malawi's economy. It appears that the supply of ganyu labour exceeds its demand, thereby positioning ganyu workers as price-takers in the market.

Depending on the context of application, these findings underscore significant implications for studying ganyu through survey data. First of all, is it necessary to warrant caution when uncritically classifying ganyu as agricultural labour. Secondly, surveys that inquire about ganyu wage for a standardised period, such as the IH(P)S that asks for an individual's daily ganyu wage equivalent, might produce biased estimates. Since ganyu is done on a piecework basis, daily ganyu wage assumes a recalculation to hours worked, and the time spent on a specific

[12] Life history interview NRV1LH14, 27 April 2023
[13] Focus group discussion FGD6, 17 February 2023

piecework varies with the individual's physical ability and time available. Moreover, wages are typically task-specific reflecting the labour intensity involved. In addition, as payment is not always made in cash, its reliability depends on realistic conversion to market prices, which can be particularly challenging in the Malawian context, characterised by highly volatile output prices (Benson & De Weerdt, 2023). Thirdly, we observed indications that wages are seasonal yet relatively inelastic. This might call into question economic interpretations that view ganyu as an efficient tool for reallocating labour in response to seasonal needs, and instead highlights the need to consider the broader socio-economic constraints that shape wage dynamics.

5.2. Social significance

In addition to offering insights into the characteristics, patterns, and prevalence of ganyu in Malawian society, the collected data reveal how ganyu is perceived by rural communities, why individuals turn to it, and how it fits into their income-earning strategies. Furthermore, the data illuminate the social significance of ganyu at the broader community level.

An interesting start to gain an initial insight in the emic perspective of the rural community, is to take a look at how the respondents themselves understand ganyu. At the end of each individual interview, respondents were asked to define ganyu in their own words. Likewise, in the focus group discussions, the group was asked to define the meaning of ganyu, which would result in one or a few definitions of ganyu. In total this brings us to 136 definitions (90 from the individual interviews and 46 from the focus group discussions). These definitions reveal what the most salient aspects of ganyu are, according to the respondents.

> '*Ganyu is a quick job that you do to find quick money. You are also paid immediately after doing the job.*'[14]

> '*[…] the money we get from ganyu is used immediately. It cannot be used to do some thing big like building a house. We just use it in the day and buy food.*'[15]

The above definitions provide a good example of an average definition given for ganyu. The most commonly mentioned features of ganyu are the short term character, the immediate payment, and the reference to money. It is also commonly mentioned as a way to find support when struggling or to solve problems in general, or to solve the lack of basic necessities, food or school fees in particular.

It is worth noting that of the 136 definitions, only 12 make an explicit reference to farming. Eight definitions make reference to other tasks, such as washing clothes, fetching firewood or moulding bricks. This evidences that the nature of ganyu does not hinge on it being agricultural labour, and that it evolved over time from being a primarily agricultural arrangement to one extended to other tasks.

Another aspect of ganyu that stands out in the definitions, is the fact that you are doing work for someone else, as such one definition states that '*Ganyu is doing someone else's work and getting paid for it.*'[16]. Additionally, when respondents are asked in the life history interviews to rank themselves as well as neighbours and friends on a six step ladder ranging from poor (step 1) to rich (step 6), a high ranking of someone is often motivated by them hiring ganyu, and a lower step is often linked to doing ganyu, as detailed in the following conversations[17]:

[14] Ganyu definition, life history interview SRV2LH7, 21 March 2023
[15] Ganyu definition, life history interview CRV1LH10, 7 April 2023
[16] Ganyu definition, life history interview SRV2LH4, 18 March 2023
[17] When directly quoting a conversation, 'I' stands for interviewer and 'R' for respondent

'I: *Why do you think you are at level 2?*[18]

R: *It is because we do the ganyu and this is the way we survive. What can you eat if you are just quiet?*'[19]

'I: *Alright. What about your friends?*

R: *The first I met when I got in this village are friends from church. At that time, they were on step 4 and now they are on step 5.*

I: *Why are they on step 5?*

R: *They are helping me whenever I want to do ganyu.*' [20]

From these definitions as well as from the codes probing into social relationships, a (perceived) class differential or economic imbalance between the person hiring ganyu and the person being hired emerged. This was often explicitly acknowledged by the respondents, as exemplified in the above quotes. In the focus group discussions, hirers are virtually always portrayed as being better off, and are often said to be individuals who either have a job, are a government official or focus on business to gain income. They employ people to do ganyu on their fields, a more lucrative strategy given the generally low wage of ganyu. This is in line with previous literature signifying the social stratification linked to ganyu arrangements (Bryceson, 2006; Englund, 1999; Whiteside, 2000).

Analysing codes related to reasons for engaging in ganyu and sources of capital reveals that ganyu serves various functions. As such, it is effective as a short-term instrument to alleviate immediate cash needs for specific items such as school fees or school uniforms, agricultural inputs such as fertiliser and seeds, or for occasional events, such as the transport fare to go to a funeral. Other mention ganyu to be more generally a coping mechanism against problems or food scarcity, something that resonates with previous literature. Occasionally, it has been mentioned to be a way to build up capital to invest in farming or a business, an observation also made in the recent study by Gono et al. (2023) that found that some households that reach self-sufficiency still engage in ganyu, to raise money for farm inputs. However, overall, money earned through ganyu is said to be used immediately, and ability to save from ganyu earnings is rare.

While ganyu can thus be an effective coping mechanism for rural households, it is not typically viewed as a favourable income-earning strategy. Next to the low wages that prevail for ganyu tasks, as explained in the previous section, this is evidenced by the fact that it is often linked or equated to poverty, as one of the respondents simply defined ganyu by stating '*Ganyu is poverty, it is extreme poverty.*'[21] Not needing to do ganyu is seen as a signifier of doing well for themselves, and thus often strived for. Respondents also often suggest that the government should strive to eliminate the necessity for ganyu altogether, by stimulating businesses by providing capital or trainings, or increasing access to farm inputs. This reflects the broader sentiment that people should not have to resort to such labour in the first place, as shown in the following interaction:

[18] 'I' stands for interviewer and 'R' for respondent.
[19] Life history interview NRV2LH9, 24 April 2023
[20] Life history interview CRV1LH5, 4 April 2023
[21] Ganyu definition, life history interview CRV2LH1, 2 April 2023

'I: What do you think the government should have done to help improve ganyu?

R: If they were supporting people, we would not have been doing ganyu'[22]

Our findings confirm that ganyu is a strategy employed to address short-term needs, but it is also closely tied to social stratification, poverty and food insecurity, as was also highlighted in previous studies (Bezner Kerr, 2005; Bryceson, 2006; Whiteside, 2000). However, our research reveals intriguing social and moral dynamics surrounding ganyu, which are explored further in the next section.

5.3. The moral economy of ganyu: a rising dichotomy?

In Section 4 it was shown that previous literature has found that there is a social and moral nature to ganyu. It can serve as a social safety net to build social ties that can be beneficial for the future, as well as carry the moral obligation for better off people in the community to help people in need by hiring them for ganyu (Bryceson, 2006; Englund, 1999; Mtika, 2001). We believe that our data do not allow us to study in depth the possible social insurance mechanism underlying ganyu, as the study period and depth was too limited to elicit meaningful findings about these often long-term and implicit ties. Nevertheless, the data revealed some interesting dynamics around the social and moral nature of ganyu.

Only a few individual definitions of ganyu highlight explicitly a social or moral dimension. The majority of respondents do thus not perceive these facets as significant characteristics of ganyu. Nonetheless, in delving deeper through focus group discussions, interviews, and detailed examinations of livelihood strategies and trajectories, interesting communal and individual sentiments emerge regarding ganyu, consisting of both social networking and moral considerations.

We find that ganyu is often done for or by relatives, friends or neighbours. Additionally, people share ganyu tasks they acquired with people in their social circle that they know are in need. The moral aspect is illustrated by people mentioning they hire certain people for ganyu because they know someone 'has problems'. Although doing ganyu is, as explained above, clearly linked to being socio-economically less well-off and hiring ganyu is also beneficial for the hirers since they often lack sufficient labour (Gono et al., 2023), evidence was found for a moral motivation behind ganyu hire. The below statements are a few expressions by the respondents that exemplify these social and moral functions:

'Ganyu is mere support. It's like,' let us support each other here'. It is about supporting each other'[23]

'R: Yes, sometimes when you find more ganyu, you pick your friends to support each other and work for the ganyu

I: Do you take different families?

R: Yes, we invite each other so that we don't lose each other during the times of problems. We mobilise each other and afterwards, we start looking for another ganyu opportunity'[24]

'When someone brings ganyu to us, it's like he has brought some help to us'[25]

Additionally, there seems to be the notion that hiring ganyu within the community

[22] Life history interview CRV1LH6, 5 April 2023
[23] Ganyu definition, life history interview NRV2LH4, 22 April 2023
[24] Life history interview SRV1LH4, 18 March 2023
[25] Focus group discussion FGD6, 17 February 2023

is not only beneficial to the individual, but also for the community at large. As such the statement to hire someone from within the village such that '*the village also benefits*'[26]. Being a responsible person '*means that you have assisted your family, assisted your country and assisted your area*'[27] and employing people for ganyu means '*helping people to be alive in the village*'[28].

Further examination of the social and moral aspects of ganyu reveals an interesting dynamic. Comparing the working conditions—including ganyu payment, relationship with the hirer, social aspects, and ganyu activity—between villages near the town and those farther away uncovers distinct patterns. As mentioned briefly above, the villages close to a town also do a significant portion of their ganyu for outside hirers. These arrangements are both for agricultural tasks, often on land that the urban residents rent in, in or nearby the village, but also for non-agricultural tasks. These non-agricultural tasks are often related to urbanisation, such as construction, brick making, or wheelbarrow transport. Obviously, the social and moral considerations of such hiring arrangements are much different than those described above. The hirers connect with villagers by asking around in the village, sometimes by going through the chief. Additionally, villagers also move to town for the day or for a few days to look for ganyu. As such we observed designated meeting places in the city where ganyu workers gather, waiting for hirers to pick them. This literal informal labour 'market' illustrates the market principle of demand and supply that is governing these labour arrangements:

'*Yes, sometimes we take vehicles. There are some bosses who have their gardens far away. They bring trucks and pack you to go and work. In this case, you need to make sure you go by the roadside where trucks park looking for ganyu workers. When they pick you, they also return you in the evening after completion of the task.*'[29]

The relationship between the hirer and hired in this case, is characterised by an impersonal one-time relationship, only defined by the labour agreement: '*It is not a stable relationship. You can work with them for two or three days and later you are done with them*'.[30] Occasionally though, durable relationships have been built up with someone who had bought land in the village or has been renting for a long time. This networking increases the chance for future ganyu opportunities.

Additionally, wages for these ganyu jobs seem to be higher:

'*Those from far pay better than those from within. The people from here do a lot of negotiations. They will say I have MK2000*[31] *but the land where they want you to work is very big unlike those who come from a far. The same piece of land that a native will pay you MK2000, you will find the employer who comes from afar paying you MK5000*'[32]

This reveals a preference to work for people from town: '*we all want to get employed with people who come from afar*'[33].

While previous literature has shown the evolution of ganyu from a mutually beneficial labour relation to a marketised form of labour in a patron-client dynamic, it was indeed found that this market logic is still accompanied by a social and moral component for ganyu agreements taking place between individuals from the same rural community. This is in line

[26] Life history interview NRV1LH14, 27 April 2023
[27] Life history interview NRV2LH10, 25 April 2023
[28] Life history interview SRV1LH11, 23 March 2023
[29] Focus group discussion FGD4, 16 February 2023
[30] Life-history interview SRV1LH5, 20 March 2023
[31] Malawian Kwacha (MK). MK1000 is about 0,50 Euros at the time of writing (August 2024).
[32] Focus group discussion FGDCRV1, 10 April 2023
[33] Life-history interview NRV1LH3, 22 April 2023

with the recent studies of Bouwman et al. (2021); Gono et al. (2023), that reveal that farming decisions by rural farming households regarding inputs such as herbicide application or labour hiring can also be driven by moral considerations around ganyu, rather than solely economic factors. Although it is not uncommon for rural individuals, particularly those near towns, to be hired for ganyu by people outside their community, research on the prevalence and nature of these ganyu arrangements is notably lacking in the literature. However, our findings reveal a distinctive characteristic of these arrangements: the impersonal and one-time nature of ganyu between an external hirer and a rural worker appears to diminish its social and moral significance. Instead, these transactions seem to be driven purely by market logic—the hirer's need for labour and the worker's need for cash.

Ganyu as a social practice has continuously evolved, shaped by crises and the interplay between its social and economic contexts, such as during famines and the HIV epidemic (Bryceson, 2006; Vaughan, 1987). Previous research has demonstrated that during such periods of crisis, *ganyu* not only becomes more prevalent but also undergoes a transformation, shedding some of its traditional social and moral connotations and taking on a more transactional nature (Bryceson & Fonseca, 2006; Devereux et al., 2006). For instance, Englund (1999) has observed for Dedza district that when external labour—often involving more distant relational ties—was employed for ganyu, both wages and working conditions tended to deteriorate.

Our study also identifies a range of transformations in the nature and moral context of ganyu. As described in this section, there is a growing prevalence of a more marketised form of ganyu, driven by the increasing involvement of urban-based hirers. This type of ganyu is primarily economic in nature, operating independently of established social ties, and reflects a shift toward more impersonal, commodified labour relations. It contrasts with what might be termed 'moral ganyu', which aligns with the original conception based on the moral economy and inter-household social relationships.

However, these shifts are not linear or uniform. Paradoxically, we also find that external hirers, particularly those operating under a "farming as business" logic, tend to offer better working conditions compared to local employers. This contradicts the earlier finding of Englund (1999) and suggests that the transformations in ganyu are shaped by new power dynamics and structural changes, such as rapid population growth and heightened demand for off-farm employment. As ganyu supply goes up, the labour market becomes increasingly saturated, further tipping bargaining power toward employers. External hirers, whose presence is growing and who bring slightly more capital and business orientation, are able to offer marginally better wages. These modest improvements attract ganyu labourers who are already facing precarious conditions, lacking the resources to invest in their own farm or depend solely on traditional community-based support systems for their survival. These developments indicate a broader reconfiguration of ganyu relations, away from traditional, community-based systems rooted in reciprocity and social norms towards more impersonal, market-driven interactions. Yet, even in this more transactional environment, elements of the moral economy persist. As access to labour opportunities becomes more competitive and uncertain, ganyu labourers need group solidarity and reciprocity to access increasingly scarce labour opportunities and navigate marginal conditions. Thus, while hiring practices may become more market-oriented, the relationships among ganyu labourers themselves may become more socially embedded in response to growing precarity.

Concluding discussion

This study has demonstrated the significant increase in ganyu and provided a comprehensive analysis of its evolution, uses, and categorization in previous studies. We have updated this understanding using IHS data and our own qualitative data collection, offering a detailed descriptive overview of ganyu activities, demographic characteristics, payment structures, and seasonal patterns. Quantitative survey evidence showed a significant increase in ganyu engagement and supply over the last decade. The qualitative evidence in this paper showed a deepening entrenchment of ganyu in the daily life and livelihood strategies of rural Malawi as '*Ganyu workers are increasing every day*'[34]. Historically rooted as a rural, agriculture-focused agreement, ganyu has evolved to include diverse activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural, as exemplified by comments like: '*Long time ago, we used to only know the ganyu where you farm. It is these days when we now see that people are busy shelling groundnuts for ganyu, or shelling maize, those never used to be ganyu*'[35].

This study also explored the social and moral dimensions of ganyu. We found that it reflects a class differential, with those performing ganyu typically in greater need of income and often accepting unfavourable payment conditions. While the motivations for engaging in ganyu are varied, it is generally not considered a desirable income-earning strategy. Additionally, urbanisation is reshaping the nature of ganyu, influencing not only its prevalence and task types but also its social and moral underpinnings. Urbanisation, which is greatly driven by population growth, exacerbates land scarcity and strains subsistence farming, thereby increasing the demand for ganyu. Urbanisation has also facilitated the entry of external hirers into rural areas. Whereas discussions of class within villages had been considered 'pretentious' (White 1987, p. 232) until recently as wealth disparities were relatively small, the rise of urban hirers may now be reinforcing class differentiations in the villages and contributing to the changing social and economic nature of ganyu. Moreover, urbanisation may be contributing to the emergence of an urban elite with disproportionate access to capital and labour, further widening national inequalities. As rural workers increasingly depend on ganyu for survival, the economic and social divide between rural labourers and urban employers risks becoming more deeply entrenched.

Our findings reveal a significant shift in the character of ganyu arrangements: transactions between external hirers (e.g., urban employers) and rural workers tend to be impersonal and short-term, driven predominantly by market logic rather than traditional social and moral considerations. This transformation from a *moral* to a *marketised* ganyu suggests a decline in the reciprocal nature of ganyu over time, corresponding with an increase in a borderline subsistence-producing peasantry.

Our study highlights the value of integrating quantitative and qualitative data on labour to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of informal labour in Sub-Saharan Africa and, more specifically, of ganyu in Malawi. This approach offers valuable insights into the interpretation and application of IH(P)S survey data while identifying areas where caution is necessary. The wide variability in task types, the volume of work, and fluctuating market prices underscore the need for careful analysis when utilizing labour survey data on ganyu, such as that found in the IH(P)S. We recognize the importance of including local forms of informal labour in survey instruments, as done in the IH(P)S with ganyu, to ensure they do not remain unnoticed. Survey questions should be tailored to capture the specific characteristics of these labour arrangements. Given that ganyu primarily consists of piecework – ranging from a few hours to several weeks – measuring the payment per task rather than per day would provide

[34] Focus group discussion, FGD13, 23 February 2023
[35] Life history interview NRV1LH6, 23 April 2023

more accurate insights. Additionally, collecting data on the types of tasks performed and their duration would be valuable, as working hours and conditions can vary significantly. Collecting data on the location where the task is performed – within the village, in another village or in town – would also be relevant. Understanding the nature of ganyu would require information about the hirers, such as whether they share a prior social connection with the labourers (for instance, as relatives or neighbours), and whether they are from within or outside the village. Qualitative data will remain essential for understanding the evolving nature of ganyu which, as evidenced from this study and prior research, continues to adapt to shifting socioeconomic conditions.

This study provides valuable insights for policymakers. Given ganyu's historical association with rural distress, its low wages, and its inability to offer full-time employment, its increase signals an urgent need for rural populations to secure income and food. However, urbanisation offers new income opportunities, particularly as urban employers renting rural land tend to offer higher wages, suggesting potential positive spillover effects.

Immediate policy intervention is required to address the widespread reliance on ganyu for employment. The shift toward short-term, impersonal, market-driven arrangements calls for better regulation. Historically, ganyu helped balance local labour needs, but as it increasingly serves external interests—such as urban residents—policymakers must differentiate between its various forms and develop tailored responses. A one-size-fits-all policy approach will be ineffective. Instead, nuanced strategies must address the distinct modalities of ganyu: labour driven by economic desperation, informal urban wage labour, and community-based arrangements balancing land and labour. Policies should also support alternative off-farm employment opportunities, as urbanisation increases demand for services and sectors like construction. Expanding reliable financial and credit options, fostering small-scale businesses, and ensuring macroeconomic stability will help stabilize rural economies.

Finally, we call for further research to contextualize the dynamics of ganyu, its links with urbanisation, and its implications for well-being. A deeper understanding of how ganyu affects livelihoods and the broader socio-economic landscape will support the development of more effective and equitable policies.

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Contribution statement

Adriana Oliveres-Mallol and Hanne Van Cappellen contributed equally to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis and writing.

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Annex Table 1: Ganyu activities, per month per region

	North	Central	South
January	Planting maize/soyabeans/groundnuts Weeding maize /soya beans/ground-nuts/cassava/rice Spraying of pesticides Making ridges Fertilizer application Banding Fishing Loading and offloading of sand	Fertilizer application Banding weeding Making ridges for sweet potatoes Planting maize/sweet potatoes Construction	Planting rice/sweet potatoes/cassava Banding of maize/ groundnuts Weeding in rice field Weeding in maize field Loading and offloading of bricks Carrying of 50 kg charcoal bags from the mountain
February	Planting sweet potatoes/beans/maize Plucking tobacco leaves Fertilizer application Banding Tying of hands Making tobacco shades Making Potatoe ridges	Weeding maize/groundnuts/soya beans Banding maize/groundnuts/soya/cassa-va/sweet potatoes Fertilizer application slashing Watering of flowers	Planting rice/sweet potatoes/cassava Banding maize/ groundnuts Washing of clothes Carrying fish from the lake Weeding in rice field Making sweet potatoes ridges winnowing
March	Making ridges for sweet potatoes/ beans Banding groundnuts Tying of hands	slashing Planting beans/sweet potatoes/ cassava Cutting trees for tobacco shades/ sowing of tobacco leaves/tying of hands Mopping and washing clothes Drying of vegetable leaves (Mfutso) Bicycle transportation	Weeding in rice fields Harvesting rice Carrying of rice bags Making ridges for sweet potatoes Loading and offloading of bricks/sand Digging Pit latrine/septic tank
April	Harvesting maize/soya beans/ground-nuts Slashing of maize Tobacco seed selection Tying of hands Construction Moulding bricks Sewing of tobacco leaves	Harvesting maize/soya beans/ground-nuts Making sweet potatoes ridges Tobacco selection/sewing of leaves/tying of hands Moulding of bricks Cutting tree trumps Winnowing and shelling of soya beans	Harvesting maize/groundnuts/rice Winnowing maize/rice Moulding bricks/Carrying of bricks/car-rying water Loading and offloading of bricks Security guard Tying of Lonas
May	Harvesting maize/groundnuts/soya beans/tobacco Drying of fish/carrying fish at the lake Moulding of bricks Mopping and washing of clothes	Harvesting maize/soyabeans/ground-nuts Moulding bricks Building houses	Harvesting groundnuts in /sewing tobac-co leaves/ making tobacco shades/seed selection of tobacco/jerking of tobacco in Mozambique. Loading/ offloading of bricks/sand/quar-ry stones Moulding bricks Washing of clothes Clearing the land
June	Harvesting maize/groundnuts/soya beans Moulding of bricks	Moulding of bricks Tying of hands Harvesting sweet potatoes/Maize Construction	Harvesting maize/rice Winnowing maize/rice Moulding of bricks Selling of potatoes and mangoes
July	Moulding bricks Digging of pit latrine Carrying tomatoes from Dimba (small garden) Building houses Jerking tobacco	Moulding of bricks Harvesting groundnuts Dimba farming (small gardens) Clearing the land Building houses Harvesting sweet potatoes	Cutting down trees Charcoal burning Winnowing of maize/ rice Harvesting rice Moulding bricks Construction
August	Moulding bricks Mopping	Making tobacco nursery Making ridges Clearing the land Loading and offloading maize, soya and G/nuts bags Sewing maize bags Moulding bricks	Conservation Agriculture Construction Clearing land Moulding bricks Making ridges

	North	Central	South
September	Making tobacco nursery beds Clearing the land Dry planting Digging pit latrine Carrying water	clearing tobacco fields Clearing the land Making ridges Winnowing of maize and soya beans Loading and offloading maize/soya/ groundnuts bags	Making ridges Moulding bricks Clearing the land
October	Watering crops in Dimba's (small gardens) Shelling of Maize Clearing the land Washing clothes	Making ridges Drying of fish Weeding in tobacco nursery Dry planting of Maize Shelling groundnuts Moulding of bricks Dimba farming (small gardens) Construction Spraying of pesticides	Making tobacco shades Planting tobacco Clearing land Moulding bricks
November	Clearing the land Making ridges Nunny	Planting Maize Seed selection Watering in Dimba's (small gardens) slashing Making ridges Drying and roasting of fish	Planting pigeon peas/rice/maize/ groundnuts Clearing land Making ridges Uprooting tree trumps from the field
December	Clearing the land Making ridges	Fertilizer Application Planting maize/soya beans /tobacco Watering Dimba's (small gardens) Seed selection	Planting maize Weeding Fertilizer application

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