

Sustainability of the Chitetezo Mbaula in Malawi



Is there a sustainable commercial pathway for Chitetezo Mbaula in Malawi?

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Introduction

Malawi's clean cooking transition remains both a significant development challenge and a substantial market opportunity. Under the National Energy Compact, the Government of Malawi aims to increase access to cleaner cooking solutions to 75% of households by 2030. Achieving this ambition will require sustained market development, private-sector participation and financing well beyond individual programmes. EnDev has supported Malawi's improved cookstove market over several years, generating practical experience on the factors that influence commercial viability, affordability and sustained adoption. Against that backdrop, this knowledge product therefore reflects on key lessons from EnDev's experience, with particular attention to the conditions required for a sustainable commercial pathway for the Chitetezo Mbaula.

The Chitetezo Mbaula (CM) is a locally manufactured, portable, wood fuelled improved cookstove designed for the way most rural Malawian households currently cook. It is intended primarily for low-income rural households that rely on freely collected firewood and have limited ability or willingness to pay for alternative cooking fuels or technologies. CM uses up to 60% less firewood than a traditional three stone fire. Adoption, therefore, offers households lower biomass consumption and associated expenditure or collection burden, while contributing to reduced pressure on forests.

The CM market has been built over many years through a combination of public, donor and carbon finance support rather than purely commercial demand. Despite this support, the market cannot yet be considered fully sustainable because significant parts of demand and distribution remain dependent on projects and subsidies.

Markets in remote areas remain unattractive to entrepreneurs, largely because of high logistical costs. A sustainable CM market would require each part of the value chain to function commercially. Stove Production Groups (SPGs) should be able to produce quality stoves at sufficient scale while recovering their costs. Distributors, retailers and promoters should be able to finance stock, reach rural markets and earn reasonable margins without relying on permanent donor support. At the same time, the final price should remain affordable enough for households to see the CM as a useful and attractive cooking option.

A sustainable CM market, therefore, does not require all development partner support to disappear. Targeted subsidies may still be needed for ultra-poor households who cannot afford the full market price. However, production, distribution and retail should increasingly operate on a commercial basis, without depending on donor support to keep the supply chain functioning. Institutionally, the sector also needs stability in order to coordinate standards, market trends and policy and so that these functions continue beyond individual projects.

Commercial Viability

Across the three main players in the CM market Dziwani Investments, Self Help Africa (SHA) and Maeve, the stove sourcing cost from SPGs is about MWK 1,500 per stove, but the total cost rises sharply once transport, storage, promoter commissions, labour and other delivery costs are included. Distribution accounts for about 61% of total cost.

SHA reports stove costs of about MWK 2,650 and MAEVE about MWK 5,092, but both organisations also receive grant support that covers additional programme and market-development costs not fully reflected in these figures. Dziwani, by contrast, operates without comparable grant support and reports a lower cost of around MWK 2,000 before the promoter margin, however, this is achieved through a highly localised model, with sales concentrated within or close to its SPGs.

EnDev has trained 322 SPGs, around 90% of whose members are women. A 2025 SPG mapping survey found that 47% of sampled groups were dormant, partly because stove production is seasonal and less attractive than other income generating activities. SPG production capacity, quality compliance and proximity to key markets help suppliers source stoves closer to demand and reduce transport costs. It also helps ensure that efforts to commercialise the CM market strengthen.

The real commercial cost of a CM is significantly above the production price, particularly when programmes push deeper into rural markets. Subsidised consumer prices of around MWK 2,500 or less do not consistently cover these costs, meaning suppliers can incur losses or depend on project financing to absorb distribution expenses.

Achieving sustainability would require moving production and stocking closer to target markets, using lean local promoter and retailer networks, improving logistical efficiency and strengthening stove quality so consumers perceive value at a higher price.

Consumers

For consumers, market uptake is constrained not only by affordability, but also by uneven product availability across locations and persistent gaps in awareness and general understanding of improved cooking technologies and their benefits. The CM primarily targets households that rely on freely collected firewood and have exceptionally low ability and willingness to pay for cooking energy. Relative to traditional three stone fires and other basic biomass options, the CM offers a locally appropriate proposition. CM uses the same wood fuel households already rely on, is portable, can be used indoors or outdoors, and is designed to reduce fuel consumption. Subsidies have, therefore, played an important role in overcoming the upfront affordability barrier and enabling large scale adoption among households. Reducing subsidies abruptly would likely lower uptake in the intended communities.

Sector Governance

For the Chitetezo Mbaula market, the National Cookstove Steering Committee (NCSC) is particularly important because commercial sustainability depends not only on producers and distributors, but also on sector wide functions that no single company or organisation can efficiently provide.

The NCSC, established in 2012 and chaired by the Ministry of Energy, is Malawi's principal multi-stakeholder coordination platform for the clean cooking sector, bringing together government, development partners, implementing organisations, private sector, civil society and academia. Through its Secretariat and four technical working groups, it coordinates stakeholder engagement, sector planning, reporting and knowledge sharing. It has supported major sector milestones, including the 2013 Malawi 2 million Clean Cookstoves Initiative, the development of the National Cookstoves Programme Roadmap and Malawi's Cleaner Cooking Energy Compact.

The NCSC's role is particularly important because commercial sustainability depends not only on producers and distributors, but also on sector-wide functions that no single company can efficiently provide. For a functioning market, NCSC's essential functions include standards and quality assurance, policy coordination, consumer protection and planning. In the short term, the priority is to stabilise the institution through a clear mandate, strong secretariat, costed work plan, predictable operating resources and agreement on which functions government, development partners and industry should finance.

Over the medium and long term, sustainability will require a formalised governance and reporting structure, adequate technical and administrative capacity, clearly defined stakeholder roles, stronger monitoring, knowledge management, and a blended financing model in which government progressively

budgets for core governance functions, private actors contribute to services from which they derive commercial value, and development partners provide time bound finance for institutional strengthening and innovation rather than indefinitely funding routine Secretariat operations.

More broadly, the sector still lacks some of the basic market infrastructure needed for a sustainable CM market. This includes regular market data on production, prices and sales, and information on replacement and repeat purchases. EnDev's experience on working with subsidies showed that even when distribution subsidies increased, physical distribution constraints continued to limit sales, suggesting that finance alone cannot substitute for a stronger market system.

Conclusion

The Chitetezo Mbaula market will only become more commercially viable if the cost of reaching consumers is reduced. The stove itself is relatively inexpensive, but transport, storage, agent commissions and delivery to remote areas can significantly increase the final cost.

A stronger market would therefore require suppliers to bring production and stock closer to demand, use more efficient local distribution networks, aggregate sales where possible, improve route planning and choose delivery models that suit different locations.

At the same time, suppliers need margins that reflect the real cost of serving these markets. Subsidies should remain targeted at households that genuinely cannot afford the full price, rather than being used to offset high distribution costs across the whole market. Over time, the aim should be to reduce avoidable supply chain costs and strengthen commercially viable sales. This suggests that the future market will not follow one model nationally, it entails that some locations may support fully commercial sales, others may require temporary or partial support, while harder to reach households may continue to need targeted subsidy.

The key policy question is, therefore, not whether support for Chitetezo Mbaula should end, but which parts of the market can realistically become commercial, which households will continue to require targeted affordability support, and which sector functions need sustained public financing.

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