



## From Response to Preparedness: Enhancing Community-led Disaster Risk Management in Malawi

### Key findings and policy implications

#### Key Messages:

- ◆ Directing resources towards early warning systems and community sensitization mitigates the impact of natural disasters on vulnerable communities, prioritizing proactive measures over reactive responses.
- ◆ To ensure effective and sustainable disaster risk management (DRM) initiatives, allocating resources to bolster district-level DRM structures in alignment with community-led resource mobilization efforts is crucial.
- ◆ Recognizing the pivotal role of youth increases community anticipatory capacity through comprehensive disaster risk management training. Innovative approaches such as theatre for development foster civic engagement, community dialogue, and resource mobilization.
- ◆ Inclusive participatory planning processes should embrace indigenous early warning information. Investing in automated community-based early warning systems, particularly focusing on agriculture and nutrition, facilitates timely decision-making and harnesses local wisdom.
- ◆ To reduce vulnerability among low-income communities, forging partnerships with the private sector is crucial. Micro-insurance and asset options can be explored, empowering communities to enhance their resilience without imposing undue burdens.

## Background

Malawi is highly vulnerable to extreme weather events, leading to climate-induced food insecurity. Despite various resilience enhancement programs over the past decade, resource mobilization for Village Civil Protection Committees (VCPCs) responsible for disaster risk management (DRM) has been minimal, with activities focused on response rather than preparedness. To address this, [Titukulane](#) conducted a process assessment to understand community-led resource mobilization initiatives by VCPCs in Zomba and Mangochi districts.

The assessment aimed to engage communities in designing their DRM and resilience strategy plans, which will be integrated into community-level DRM planning. Titukulane conducted training on resource mobilization in 2022 and continues to support communities throughout 2023 for sustainable uptake of resource mobilization activities across Zomba and Mangochi districts. The assessment also informs national stakeholders, including the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) and other NGOs implementing the National Resilience Strategy (NRS), of key areas for community-led resource mobilization to ensure grassroots coordination of the NRS. The report and brief also aim to influence systemic and structural changes within local structures for increased investment in the NRS.

The national DRM institutional structure in Malawi comprises various committees responsible for disaster management at the village, area, district, and city/municipal levels, with VCPCs playing a key role at the village level. In 2021 Titukulane supported Zomba and Mangochi District councils in establishing and revamping VCPCs and continues to build the capacity of youth networks within communities through training on Theatre for Development, a social behavior change approach promoting civic dialogue and community engagement for improved anticipation of shocks and stresses.

## Reorienting processes to lean towards preparedness

### ***Invest resources in the DRM processes towards community preparedness to minimize the impact of the shocks.***

The NRS recognizes that disasters are never entirely natural but are the result of how natural events interact with aspects such as a lack of preparedness and coping and adaptation capacity, as well as inaction to reduce over-exposure and vulnerability to hazards. It further states that while humanitarian reforms have improved Malawi's national response, emergency interventions are fragmented, underscoring the need to improve accountability and coordination among actors, and between prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery actions.

Disaster preparedness entails deliberate investment in early warning systems (EWS), sensitization of communities on best practices for risk reduction and prevention to avoid or minimize the impact of natural disasters, and strengthening community resilience through provision of an enabling environment for enhanced economic livelihoods of the people, among others.

The National Resilience Strategy (NRS) focuses on strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus through mainstreaming Disaster Risk Management (DRM) across all technical sectors and administrative levels prioritizing drought and flood risks, and other emergencies. However, state funding towards implementation the strategy is limited, resulting to DRM processes being oriented towards response versus preparedness.

This calls for adequate financing for the implementation of the NRS if DRM is to improve for the benefit of the vulnerable communities.

### **Sensitizing communities to access and utilize EW information within their communities, timely**

#### ***Metrological services system takes time to interpret data and disseminate, invest more in early warning equipment***

Access to weather and climate information is limited for vulnerable communities as "last mile" dissemination channels are inadequate. Currently, various dissemination methods are used, including radio (national and local), email, television, print media, internet and national workshops, and cell phones. There is limited understanding of the effectiveness of these methods and uptake of this information by vulnerable communities, particularly women. This is partly because information, particularly scientific information and concepts, is not understandable or communicated effectively, nor is it clear how to integrate it with local knowledge and socio-cultural and gender-differentiated contexts. Titukulane has trained civil protection committees district, area and Group Village Headman (GVH) levels in interpretation and effective message delivery. The project has trained 378 VCPCs in early warning systems. The project has also distributed 579 mobile phones to increase number of people being reached with the early warning information. The project further trained Civil Protection Committee (CPCs) at district and area levels on participatory scenario planning (PSP). These CPCs have been disseminating the weather messages in the communities using the PSP approach.

Limited financial, technical and human capacity available for hydro-meteorological services, which has resulted in reduced capacity of the Department of Climate Change and Metrological services DCCMS, DoDMA and Department of Water Resources (DWR) to fulfill their core mandates: One of the main reasons for the current state of the climate information and early warning system in Malawi is a lack of public sector support. With limited funding provided to DCCMS, DWR and DoDMA, as well as other engaged ministries, departments and district councils, there has been

- i) a steady decline in the state of the hydro-meteorological observation networks in Malawi over the last 20-30 years and
- ii) a limited ability of these entities to issue early warning systems and climate information as per their mandate.

There are human and financial capacity and resource limitations constraining expansion of observational network coverage and forecasting as well as appropriate communication and packaging of warnings for local communities. Problems include the spatial and temporal scale of climate information, often not appropriate for decision-making, poor accessibility of information, untimely weather/climate warnings, and lack of explanation of links between locally held and scientific information. Therefore, there is a need for more private sector and public sector investment in early warning systems.

## **Identify resources to substantiate community initiatives at district level and national level**

### ***Allocate resources to complement the resources mobilized by the communities for disaster response***

The assessment established that while the community the initiatives are making progress in mobilizing resources for disaster response, the resources are very low for meaningful interventions. For instance, VCPCs mobilized contributions to a maximum of K500 per member per year, with others only parting away with K200 per year. Such resources can only do the bare minimum in cases of disaster response.

Further, interactions with district level players such as the Relief and Rehabilitation Officers (RROs) and Metrological Services Offices (MET Officers) revealed that the resources mobilized at district level through contingency planning are technically unavailable for response in the case of disasters owing to the same limited funds allocation towards NRS implementation (stated above).

It is therefore recommended that the government consider resource allocation to the district DRM structures to substantiate the community efforts for disaster response. Some

of the gains made through interventions by both the state and partners in building the resilience of the communities are undone due to this lack of resources once disasters occur.

Also, if the communities are provided with opportunities for meaningful livelihoods, it would capacitate them to contribute more towards disaster response. This means that there is need for collaborative efforts from both the government and partners to enhance the economic environment in the communities to ensure that communities become more resilient.

## **Youth integration to increase community anticipatory capacity**

### ***Target youth as key stakeholders in increasing community anticipatory capacity.***

### ***Strengthen youth networks' capacity with disaster risk management training to sensitize communities to mobilize resources in anticipation of shocks and stresses.***

Youth networks play a crucial role in building community resilience to climate-induced food insecurity. By strengthening their capacity with DRM training, they can mobilize resources in anticipation of shocks and stresses, such as extreme weather events. Training in Theatre for Development (TfD), which accords youth space to participate in decision-making processes, promotes civic dialogue and engagement, and provides an income through theatre performances, is essential.

Titukulane has trained 131 youth clubs in TfD, specifically for DRM interventions such as increasing the functionality of early warning systems. The youth participants have effectively sensitized their communities on the importance of resource mobilization and fundraising for Village Civil Protection Committees (VCPCs) within their communities. This has included sharing downscaled seasonal forecasts and illustrating agronomic practices that communities should follow given the expected scenarios for that season.

Allocating resources to build youth networks' capacity through training and providing funding for youth-led DRM initiatives would enable the youth to contribute meaningfully to community resilience-building and ensure grassroots coordination of the National Resilience Strategy (NRS).

## **Documentation and dissemination of indigenous information to complement scientific downscaled forecasts to contextualize agriculture advisory services**

*Mainstream indigenous early warning information in participatory planning processes is essential to prepare for and respond to shocks in areas prone to natural disasters.*

*Invest in automated community-based early warning systems for prompt decision-making, especially around agriculture and nutrition.*

Integrating indigenous knowledge with scientific information is crucial to enhance community anticipatory capacity and response to natural disasters. Investing in automated community-based early warning systems for agriculture and nutrition is essential for prompt decision-making. Reviving indigenous EWS complements scientific information and increases access to information firsthand by community members. Documentation of indigenous early warning signs and their integration with scientific information is necessary for area-specific participatory scenario planning processes. Titukulane recommends DoDMA to document indigenous early warning signs and incorporate them into DRM and contingency plans. Illustrations of indigenous early warning information can be shared in strategic places such as schools and health centers to increase awareness among the youth.

## **Government to partner with private sector to provide micro insurance/asset options to communities**

With over 80% of Malawi's labor force in the rural sector, many producers lack access to financial products, leaving them highly vulnerable to external shocks, particularly those associated with recurrent droughts. The World Bank has long recognized the need to reduce this vulnerability. One successful mechanism in other countries is indexed weather insurance, which uses an indicator such as rainfall to determine coverage. While micro-insurance projects face challenges, Malawi has had success with weather indexes, reducing costs by eliminating the need for multiple individual claims and subjectivity in assessing contingencies. The Insurance Association of Malawi intermediates the coverage, removing the need for a direct relationship between the client and the insurance company, and policies are distributed to members. By partnering with the private sector, the government can help provide vulnerable communities with the financial tools they need to build resilience.

In conclusion, the Community-led Resource Mobilization and Early Warning Systems Process Assessment in Malawi's Zomba and Mangochi districts has identified critical areas for improvement in disaster risk management and resilience building. There is a need for increased investment in disaster preparedness, particularly in early warning systems and community sensitization. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of community-led resource mobilization initiatives, focusing on youth engagement and integrating indigenous knowledge in participatory planning processes. To achieve these goals, adequate financing and technical and human capacity are required at both the district and national levels, with collaboration between government and private sector entities. Overall, the findings of the process assessment provide valuable insights for stakeholders in Malawi's disaster risk management sector, with potential for influencing systemic and structural changes to increase investment in the National Resilience Strategy and enhance the resilience of vulnerable communities.

### **References**

Kayamba-Phiri F. and Khulumbo, B. (2023). *Community-led Resource Mobilization and Early Warning Systems Process Assessment*. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/digital/collection/p15738coll2/id/136721>

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