

HOUSEHOLD SURVEY FOR ANTICIPATORY ACTION IN MALAWI

Malawi and the rationale for Anticipatory Action

Malawi is a country that is highly exposed to climate hazards, including dry spells and floods, among others. Vulnerability is also high with a great fraction of the population dependent on rainfed agriculture for their food and income. The 2020 ND-GAIN index ranks Malawi 163 out of 182 countries, making it highly vulnerable to climate change, but lacking readiness and resilience to withstand the changes in the climate.

In-country capacities to manage climatic hazards have eroded over time, given the increasing frequency, variability, and intensity of these events. In this context, the Government of Malawi has made a commitment to break the cycle of hunger and recurring humanitarian need. This commitment is enshrined in the country's key guiding policies and programmes, including the National Resilience Strategy.

The use of objective forecast-based triggers, along with predetermined actions and pre-arranged finance, has been integrated into the government's priorities, driving a change in the way that risks and shocks are managed. In this context, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Country Team came together to support Anticipatory Action (AA) in-country to get ahead of predictable disasters and related humanitarian needs.

OCHA-facilitated AA in-country has focused on dry spells. The focus on dry spells is unique to the OCHA-facilitated framework. While a discrete hazard, the impact of dry spells are outsized impacts, especially when they occur in critical times of the agricultural season, making them a priority for humanitarian action. This innovative shift is intended to promote a more effective and efficient approach, by focusing on specific rainfall anomalies during exact periods of the rainfall period, which have considerable humanitarian impacts to be addressed. Due to climate change, more erratic rainfall patterns are expected, and these of rainfall anomalies offer a great learning experience on how to respond to these damaging trends that are due to increase in frequency and intensity.

About the study

Anticipatory action involves thinking and acting ahead of predictable problems. Therefore, AA offers a prime opportunity to proactively engage local communities, not as recipients of post-disaster emergency assistance, but as partners in the definition of mitigating interventions that are appropriate in their context. OCHA, therefore, commissioned a local research team in Malawi (Research Insight Learning) to study and learn from the experience of families previously affected by disasters, such as floods and dry spell, including:

- 1 Whether they rely on information to “know” in advance if and when these hazards will occur.
- 2 If there are decisions and actions they take to get ready that might reduce their suffering.
- 3 If they find support in their communities and from local and national authorities to prepare, endure and recover from these shocks.
- 4 If there are decisions and actions they would like but are constrained to take (ie., lack the resources and capacity).
- 5 What kind of warning and help they would prefer to receive, how and when, to fare better in the face of these risks.



ANTICIPATORY ACTION FRAMEWORK

The trigger

A robust alert mechanism embedded in a clear decision-making process

The money

Pre-arranged finance

The delivery

Pre-agreed action plan that can fundamentally alter the trajectory of the crisis



Mitigate the humanitarian impact of predictable disasters

The objectives of the study were to:



Incorporate the **knowledge** and **expectations** of vulnerable households from the outset of the pilot.



Improve the **pertinence**, **quality**, and **timing** of the anticipatory action framework.



Contextualize the activities, channels of delivery, and partnerships to match the **target locations** and **community preferences**.



What did we learn about floods?

81% of respondents noted that floods are mainly associated with the **overflow of rivers**.

Floods most commonly occur in the period of December to March, especially in the month of February. Multiple flood events can occur within a single season. The perceived frequency of floods is increasing. On average, a flood event can be experienced for just over a month (34 days). This, however, has an outsized impact with coping strategies typically needed for 3 to 5 months, on average.

43% of respondents noted that **they had prior knowledge** ahead of a flood event.

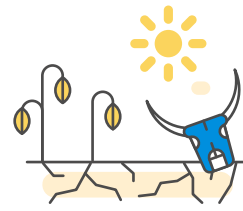
The most common and preferred communication channels for early warning include radio (38% of respondents) and village head authorities (22% of respondents). Communities also rely on indigenous knowledge to tell if a flood is going to take place. Respondents noted the need for EW messages and that this ought to be strengthened with practical advisories on actions to best prepare.

Most respondents noted deciding (**62%**) and acting (**57%**) in response to floods after the event.

Most act only when severe damage had taken place, such as loss of shelter, and, or crops. Typically, at this point they end up having to temporarily move to higher/safer ground (followed by reinforcing their homes). Relocation is a difficult decision to make (as it exposes their assets to loss), which may only be supported by grave need, negatively reinforcing a reactionary approach. Common coping strategies also include undertaking casual, waged labor (ganyu) (44.8%) followed by reduced number of meals consumed per person (31%) and reduced portions of food consumed per person (24.1%). Livestock was noted as a viable asset to help with coping (36.5% of respondents). More options are needed to support risk management and coping with floods.

58% respondents noted that most assistance arrived **during the shock** and **37%** after the shock.

There is significant preference for assistance during and before the shock occurs. There is also a call from respondents to shift from non-cash to cash-based assistance (33.4%), especially among women (42%). Most prefer assistance from the GVH and local village structures (48%), before looking externally.



What did we learn about dry spells?

35% of respondents noted that **three weeks** is the most common duration of a dry spell.

Like floods, the perceived frequency of dry spell events is increasing, and it can take place more than once within a single rainfall season. The period from December to March is when dry spells take place, especially in the month of February, followed by January. Most respondents (34.5%) reported that the impacts lasted 3 to 5 months. This was closely followed by those (31%) that reported a duration of 1 to 2 months.

49.2% act **after the shock** and **after very visible damage has occurred**.

In an attempt to adapt to climate change driving dry spell incidence, respondents noted willingness and capacity to change their agricultural practices. Most commonly respondents noted shifting to drought-tolerant crop varieties (25%) and short cycle varieties (24%). However, there is a noticeable gap for EW messaging on dry spells, over 56% of respondents asked for this. To fill this gap, respondents wish for messaging to be accompanied by practical and actionable advisories.

Coping strategies are typically applied during (**60%**) and after (**28%**) the shock and the type of coping strategies has remained the same in recent years.

Overall, the most reported coping mechanisms were waged labor (26.5%), borrowing money (20.63%), and reducing meal portions (12.9%).

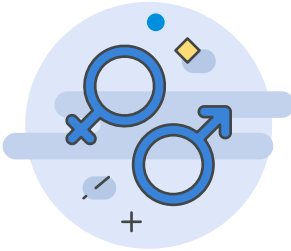
Notably, there is a considerable number of people acting before the shock, especially when compared to floods. It may seem that in the absence of EW messaging, climate change adaptation measures may be driving this. Once again, livestock (34.5%) was noted as the most useful asset for coping.

Only **8.5%** of assistance arrived before the dry spell, as per respondent feedback.

46.3% got assistance during and 45.4% after the shock.

Assistance may be coming through resilience and climate change adaptation interventions, not just humanitarian assistance. Respondents are asking for assistance before a shock (25%), but also during (24%). Once again, there is a notable ask for cash-based assistance (26%). While local structures play a big role in the response to dry spells, it seems there are more external actors involved, especially humanitarian impacts of a shock on the most vulnerable communities.

Gender perspectives from the findings



A few notable gender issues came up as follows:

- More women are asking for more effective early warning systems.
- More women asking for change from non-cash to cash transfers.
- Women seems to have less access to key assets, such as livestock, that help with managing risks.
- Women are more likely to employ long term risk management measures, such as planting trees, when they have access to assets.
- More women involved in piece work as a coping strategy and thereby exposed to protection risks.
- Respondents are hopeful that AA can help with meeting the needs of different groups and overcome gender imbalances given the upfront investments in design and planning.

Recommendations

General

- Strengthen EWS reach and impact by integrating practical advisories and channeling these through radio and local community structures.
- Prioritize the use of cash-based modalities, enabling more choice and freedom of use by the target populations.
- Enhance access to strategic non-food items (NFIs) that help meet specific needs within the anticipatory action window, such as replanting in the case of poor rains, or strengthening of shelter structures ahead of a flood.
- Integrate activities that protect and promote livestock, given their significant role in risk management by local communities.
- Seek to align and channel support through local structures and to enhance their capacities in assisting community members.
- Make sure to prioritize the most vulnerable, specifically children, the elderly, and pregnant and lactating mothers (in that order).
- Tailor assistance to the needs of the different vulnerability groups being targeted and, as needed, conduct further assessments to support this action.



Floods

- Prioritize focus on riverine flooding.
- Focus on monitoring risk during the period of concern, specifically December to February, especially the month of February.
- Expand options for risk management for households beyond relocation.



Dry Spells

- Focus on the period from December to March which is when dry spells take place, especially in the month of February, followed by January.
- Take advantage that the window of opportunity for AA is broader than the immediate shock event, typically 3 to 5 months on average [before peak impact].
- Ensure closer coordination across different initiatives, especially humanitarian action to dry spells vis-à-vis efforts on climate adaptation and resilience building.



Gender

- Ensure women have access to EWS and can make use of these messages through adequate support.
- Support women's access to key assets that contribute to risk management, such as livestock.
- Promote the use of cash-based transfers to smoothen consumption dips, that force women to seek waged labor and limit food consumption, which can have negative impacts on their wellbeing.
- Beside cash-based transfers, it would be beneficial to protect and promote the income generating activities of women in the face of disasters.
- Leverage the work by women to undertake long term risk management but do so in a way that does not overburden them.
- Ensure vulnerability profiles are used to target and tailor assistance. Support additional studies, as needed.