



**The winds of change:
Climate change, poverty and the
environment in Malawi**

Executive Summary

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“Previously water would flood mainly at the peak of the rainfall season and mainly along the river banks. These days, floods occur anytime during the rainy season. Previously people would relocate to higher grounds but these days even people settled in areas once considered safe are affected by floods”

Ebbie Mwakasungula, Village Headman, Karonga

“We expect rains and they don’t come, or we get heavy rains, which only destroy and don’t help our crop production”

Peter Chapasi, Thomasi village, Thyolo

“Heavy winds blow away our houses”.

Enless Nakhuba, Thomasi village, Thyolo

In Malawi the winds shape the lives and livelihoods of farmers and fisherfolk. They know each wind by name, when it comes, how it behaves, its effects, and therefore, what they should do in response. But now they say that the winds that once brought rain to make the crops grow and fish to their nets no longer blow as and when they should. Instead there is a muddle of contradictory currents, both in the air and in the waters of Lake

Malawi. Sometimes the winds are so strong, and rains so heavy, that they destroy houses, crops and boats.

Furthermore, people report that the main rainy season is becoming ever-more unpredictable. In general over the last 40 years they say temperatures are hotter and the rains are arriving later and becoming more intense and concentrated, which reduces the length of the growing season and triggers both more droughts and more floods.

Climate change interacts with environmental degradation, notably deforestation, and it is women who suffer most. Women have multiple roles as farmers and bringers of water and firewood and so depend very directly on natural resources. At the same time their position in society means that generally they have less access to income and credit and little or no voice in decision making.

That resulting increased vulnerability feeds the spread of HIV and AIDS, for example if women resort to selling sex for food

during the hungry months before the harvest. The spread of HIV in turn weakens people’s ability to respond to the changing climate. It saps both individual strength and institutional capacity to respond to the twin challenges of climate change and HIV and AIDS.

People’s observations of winds, rain and temperatures are consistent with what scientists say are the likely climatic changes resulting from man-made global warming, caused primarily by the emissions of carbon dioxide and other so-called “greenhouse gases” through the burning of coal, oil and gas by today’s industrial powers.

In Malawi, though, people connect these alterations in winds and rainfall patterns not to pollution from industry in the global North, but to environmental changes closer to home: notably deforestation. Malawi has one of the highest rates of deforestation in southern Africa, primarily because the rapidly rising population has almost no access to any other form of fuel and so depends upon charcoal for cooking. As a result, people have also lost access to

forest foods that once helped them through hungry times.

Now there is a big drive to plant more trees. But as one village woman asked Oxfam researchers, “if we plant all these trees, will that solve the problem?”. Planting trees in Malawi will not stop global warming which is primarily due to carbon dioxide emissions from industry and transport. But, up to a point, and as part of a suite of adaptation practices, it will certainly help people to cope with climate change impacts by shading the soil, acting as wind breaks, cutting soil erosion and smoothing water flows thereby reducing sudden flooding.

Other essential adaptation measures must be to boost agricultural productivity and diversify crops. In Malawi people say “maize is life” – “chimanga ndi moyo”. Maize is the staple crop upon which virtually everyone depends. But traditional varieties no longer have time to ripen before the rains stop – or floods rot the plants before they can be harvested. The result has been hunger on a regular basis, and sometimes, the horrors of starvation.

Yet in spite of this, Malawi is also beginning to demonstrate that with the right support, farmers can succeed and overcome some of the limitations of both poverty and a



Malawi: places mentioned in the text of the main report. Oxfam took testimony from farmers, fisherfolk, and community workers in these locations across the country to build up a picture of climate changes and impacts. People interviewed consistently reported similar phenomena including changes in wind patterns; longer, hotter dry seasons; more uneven and erratic rainfall, and more intense rains.

Subsistence maize farmer Estella Njolo. "The weather's not like when I was a child," said Estella in Kunthembwe. "There's been a big change. Rainfall doesn't come when we expect it. It should come when the maize is tasselling (growing the hairy tufts that protrude from the cob) that's when it needs all the water. This year we've had good rains and a good harvest, I'll admit. But it's May, and it's still raining! We need sun now to dry the harvested maize." Interviewed in May 2007. Photo: Abbie Trayler-Smith/Oxfam



fickle climate. Crucially 2006 and 2007 were years of generally good rain and just as crucially, improved government policies and support, meant two record-breaking national maize harvests in a row. The record-breaking harvests give hope for the future, albeit fragile. Malawi is dangerously over-dependent on maize. Building resilience to climate change means seizing this moment to diversify crops and diversify rural livelihoods ready for the next time that the rains are poor.

Good adaptation and good development are intimately linked. For farmers it starts with being able to get access to improved seeds – faster maturing and higher yielding - but to fulfil the potential of such seeds requires much more, including training in innovative farming methods – and sometimes the revival of old methods. The use of irrigation and compost, and growing a wider range of crops, are particularly crucial in the south, where population is high and land shortages are exacerbated by the presence of huge tea estates.

But good adaptation and good development need to go further than good farming, especially for women. Women interviewed for this report see adaptation in a holistic way. Women want better services and help to

diversify livelihoods, ranging from assistance in looking after HIV and AIDS orphans to free up some of their time and energy, to access to credit and loans to start small businesses.

The government of Malawi has developed a list of priority activities that it wants to implement in order to start adaptation to climate change. Malawi's National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) aim to improve community resilience, restore forests, improve agricultural production, and improve preparedness for floods and droughts and boost climate monitoring. To fund Malawi's NAPAs requires US\$ 22.43 million. To date, however, no money has been forthcoming from the international community that asked Malawi to develop its plan. Oxfam says the ongoing failure to fund the NAPAs drawn up by Least Developed Countries is unacceptable. However, Civil Society Organisations in Malawi also say lack of donor funding must not become an excuse for inaction: the government can and should do more even if the NAPAs remain unfunded.

Whatever Malawi does to adapt to continuing climate change – and there is much it can do – it is in the context of still-rising global temperatures. If temperatures

cross the threshold of an average 2 degrees Centigrade higher than in pre-industrial times, then scientists fear that the Earth's climate will change in sudden and radical ways. It is unlikely that any society, anywhere, will be able to adapt effectively to such an increase, especially one as poor as Malawi.

To prevent such dangerous temperature increase Oxfam is among thousands of Civil Society Organisations campaigning for industrialised countries to act urgently to massively reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

However, even if the necessary actions are taken to slash greenhouse gas emissions, heat that has built up in the oceans and atmosphere means temperatures will rise further before levelling off. So Malawi, and other African countries, will have to do more to adapt, both to the vicissitudes of current climate and to future climatic uncertainty. Good adaptation will have a double benefit, in the present as well as the future.

As well as the right policies, the right support from the international community is equally essential. Such support is only right and just; Malawi's own greenhouse gas emissions are miniscule compared to the gases

that the now-wealthy industrialised countries have put into the atmosphere to fuel their industrial revolutions, yet through no fault of their own it is poor countries like Malawi where the consequences of climate change will be most damaging.

Yet so far support from the international community, even for urgent and immediate adaptation needs that Malawi and other Least Developed Countries were asked to identify, has not been sufficiently forthcoming. Oxfam is therefore also campaigning to see that poor countries receive the funds they need in order to adapt and survive.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations:

Recommendations for community level:

Poor communities are the worst affected by, and least able to cope with, climate change impacts. Therefore the foundation of any initiative to address climate change hinges on communities being aware of the issues, owning the process of adaptation and having the capacity to undertake and maintain adaptation. At the same time, there must be wider supportive political and institutional frameworks.

Local knowledge based on first-

hand experience of climate change and adaptation is going to be critical to the successful design of community adaptation and this must be tapped.

Women in Malawi bear the greatest burdens from climate change so it is crucial that their participation is made central to adaptation efforts.

Local sustainable environmental and natural resource management are essential in order to reduce vulnerability whether caused by climate change or by environmental degradation. These should be strengthened within adaptation and also Disaster Risk Reduction programmes.

People do not perceive climate change as something separate or additional to their lives and livelihoods, but intimately connected. Therefore, it is important to ensure that initiatives to address climate change are equally integrated with the promotion and diversification of sustainable livelihoods. All vulnerability assessments need to take account of projected future climate hazards as well as current variability. Likewise, adaptation measures that address current and future levels of climate change should be given priority.

Recommendations for civil society and non-governmental organisations:

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working in Malawi should make climate risk analysis an integral part of all appraisals before initiating work with communities.

CSOs and international NGOs should facilitate awareness and capacity-building around climate change, in their staff, their partners, government and other organisations, and in the communities which they serve.

CSOs and international NGOs should work together both to strengthen community-based climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction and to strengthen advocacy at national level. They need to advocate for government to take up its responsibilities for leadership and co-ordination at all levels, and to demand new, additional, sufficient and predictable flows of adaptation finance from the countries both most responsible for today's climate impacts and most capable of assisting. They need to advocate too for industrialised countries to drastically and urgently reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

Recommendations for government level:

The government should strengthen institutional mechanisms for more effective co-ordination of climate change adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction programmes. The government should establish budgetary allocations to finance the NAPA projects and further climate change initiatives. To be successful, all these efforts must involve poor communities and civil society.

The government should strengthen linkages between the Environmental Affairs department and the Department of Disaster Management Affairs. This should include developing a methodology for harmonised vulnerability and adaptation assessment.

Agriculture and related activities should get priority in climate related research. Government needs to strengthen the capacity of the Meteorological Department to improve both long-term climate modelling and regular, short-term weather forecasting and dissemination in order to give farmers the information that they need.

Government should prioritise energy efficient stoves and other technologies for cooking and discourage the continued production of charcoal, and help



Max Munyariwa
Byumbwe, Thyolo,
Southern Malawi.
"My house was
destroyed last month
(early March 2009).
There was a very
strong wind that night,
and fog. My house had
a grass roof so it was
just blown off and the
house fell down.

"Wind and rain here is
not a new thing. The
wind starts coming
from November to
January. The strongest
wind usually blows
from southeast to
northwest and normally
it comes during the
rainy season. But the
wind now blows in
different directions. It's
changing. I've noticed
that the wind and rain
here is getting more
severe. It's causing
us problems in two
ways: it destroys our
houses and our crops.
When the maize has
reached maturity, if it
is waterlogged it falls
over and rots.

"We have had good
rain here this year and
we have just finished
harvesting maize but
the next village (1 mile
away) hasn't started
yet because the rains
are late." Photo: Abbie
Trayler-Smith/Oxfam

poor and vulnerable communities to find alternative livelihoods.

Government should strengthen formal and informal education about climate change and work with CSOs to raise public awareness.

Based upon the foundation of dialogue and discussion with its citizens, the government of Malawi should proactively participate in international conferences and discussions to highlight the injustice of climate change and the plight of poor countries

and communities. In view of the current round of crucial intergovernmental negotiations towards a post-2012 regime, the government should immediately strengthen its investment in capacity-building its national delegation and diplomatic corps to join with other Southern governments to press for emissions reductions and new mechanisms to ensure flows of new, additional, sufficient and predictable finance for adaptation in poor countries and communities.

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Front cover image: People in Malawi say the familiar winds are becoming more erratic and unreliable, and sometimes dangerously strong. Droughts and floods are increasing, partly because of deforestation and the cutting down of reed beds such as these on the shores of Lake Malawi. Photo: John Magrath/Oxfam.

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