

Building resilience for food security in Malawi

Background



Photo: Marcus Perkins/Tearfund

Malawi is vulnerable to extreme weather events, notably drought and flooding, and it is anticipated that climate change will increase the incidence of erratic weather in the future. More than 18 floods and seven major droughts occurred in the country between 1967 and 2008. The 2002 drought affected 2.83 million people, and is believed to have caused thousands of hunger-related deaths. Malawi's small-scale agriculture is overwhelmingly rain-fed and the immediate impact of a drought or flood is to reduce agricultural production.

Malawi has also experienced widespread environmental degradation due to the combination of rapid population growth, agricultural expansion into marginal lands, accelerated deforestation, lack of alternative livelihoods and knowledge gaps with reference to the optimal management of land and natural resources. Both extreme weather events and environmental degradation contribute to food insecurity with the rural poor and small-scale agricultural households feeling the effects most acutely.

Small-scale farmers can get caught in a 'vicious cycle' of food insecurity, asset depletion and vulnerability to shocks. Droughts have ongoing impacts via eroding assets and damaging livelihoods. These changes lower people's resilience to shocks, and affected families often find that they have an even harder time responding to future events.

Tearfund Malawi Partnership Programme Strategy

Food security and disaster mitigation are key priorities. One objective of this strategy is to increase food production, livelihood diversification and preparedness to droughts. It also seeks to link disaster preparedness and disaster response activities, and engages in advocacy for the development and implementation of local- and national-level disaster management plans.

The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), one of Tearfund's partners in the programme, has been implementing food security projects since 1993 and disaster risk reduction projects since the southern Africa food crisis of 2001–2002. Their aim is to help communities move to a 'virtuous cycle' of food security, asset accumulation and resilience, as activities that improve lives and livelihoods help them to build an asset base that in turn increases their resilience to subsequent events.

Activities

A DFID-funded CCAP disaster risk reduction project in Malawi's Mzimba District includes the following activities:

- Crop diversification. Alternative crops to maize include cassava, groundnuts, sweet potato, beans, soya and pigeon peas. Interplanting is encouraged as a means to raise production, improve climate resilience and control pests.
- Provision of improved seed varieties such as fast-maturing maize that copes well with short, erratic rains and local pests, yet can be harvested and replanted for years before suffering a significant fall in performance. A pass-on scheme means that households receive the seed on the condition that they help disseminate it to others.
- Environmental restoration. Restoring degraded lands via soil and water conservation technologies such

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as applying manure to fields, composting, water harvesting, contour ridges, and agroforestry. These technologies can raise farm productivity while enhancing resilience to shocks.

- Pass-on scheme providing goats to households on the condition that they help disseminate offspring to others.
- Capacity building in sustainable agriculture, gender and development, post-harvest treatment, food processing, leadership and empowerment.
- Development of communal grain banks.
- Development of DRR community-action plans and a Disaster Management Committee in each community to mobilise the community for the accountable delivery of DRR interventions.

Impact on beneficiaries

A cost benefit analysis of this project showed that over four years it had a highly positive impact on target communities in terms of household income and assets, education, health and reduced mortality rates. Increased income allowed people to have an adequate diet, reducing their susceptibility to disease and maintaining their capacity to work and learn. Surplus income was used to pay for school fees, milling of grain, petty trade and new assets such as bicycles. There was also a build up of savings and assets for future contingencies.

For every £1 invested, the project activities delivered £24 of net benefits to the communities to help them overcome food insecurity while building their resilience to drought and erratic weather. This positive financial return on investment provides a powerful argument for investing in preventative activities in vulnerable small-scale agricultural communities.

Cost benefit analysis is a useful, evidence-based tool to analyse the benefits of resilience-building activities and to make a strong contribution to debates on the value of integrating a resilience-strengthening approach into development and humanitarian programmes. However, the programme's quantitative benefits should be considered alongside its qualitative benefits, such as the confidence communities expressed that they will be able to withstand future droughts.

"If another big drought hit, it wouldn't be like before. Ample food would still be available within the community, since some farmers have greatly increased their production and those using soil, water and conservation (SWC) techniques may get a good harvest despite drought. We also now have savings from previous years. We are much more secure now."

Beneficiary of the DRR project, Jobe Jere village

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