



Restoring ecosystems to build resilience to climate shocks in Malawi

Overview

The impact of the climate crisis is no longer a distant threat, but a daily struggle for communities in Malawi where 80 percent of people depend on smallholder agriculture. There have been five major extreme weather events – drought and floods – over the last seven years. The destructive effects of Cyclone Freddy in March 2023 – which have had a significant impact on the region's crops, infrastructure and livelihoods – is another wake-up call on the climate crisis.

Malawi is among the countries that contribute the least to the global greenhouse gas emissions, yet they are experiencing significant losses in terms of lives, livelihoods, harvests and local ecosystems due to the frequent occurrence of severe climate events.

Since 2017, the World Food Programme (WFP) in Malawi, in collaboration with the Government of Malawi, has been implementing integrated resilience building activities together with local communities to increase their capacity to adapt to the impacts of climate change, improve their food and nutrition security and restore local ecosystems. Over 20 million trees have been planted and 42,000 hectares of degraded land have been rehabilitated. The approach has yielded impressive benefits in restoring landscapes, increasing access to water, diversifying food production and income sources, and supporting access to markets.

Programme development and design

WFP's integrated resilience package is currently being implemented in eight districts in Malawi and ensures local and community participation through seasonal livelihoods planning at the subnational level and through community-based participatory planning at the local level. Evidence shows that these activities have contributed to sustainable food systems and enhanced community resilience to climate shocks.

The cornerstone of the integrated resilience package is food assistance for assets (FFA), through which WFP aims to increase agricultural productivity and community resilience to climate shocks. WFP is currently supporting 118,000 households (500,000 people) with interventions for land resources management, irrigation, crop and livestock production and reforestation, among others. WFP's integrated resilience building portfolio focuses on watershed management, restoration of agricultural land, and adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices. Alongside FFA, other complementary interventions were implemented, particularly at household level, including initiatives on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and the promotion of kitchen gardens.

WFP's integrated package consists of five key activities that build upon each other to improve participants' overall resilience more sustainably. FFA is the cornerstone of the approach together with climate services and participatory integrated climate services for agriculture, village savings and loans (VSLAs), farmers' insurance against shocks and smallholder agriculture market support.



Communities are at the centre of the activities through the implementation of community-based participatory planning where farming communities identify their own challenges and ways to address them.

Impact and evaluation

In Malawi, resilience building activities have supported over 500,000 people and are indirectly benefiting entire communities through an integrated package of land resource management, irrigation, crop and livestock production and reforestation. This has not only led to restored environments, but an increase in and diversification of agricultural production. Where farmers used to almost exclusively grow maize and struggle with low yields on small parcels of land, they now also grow cassava, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, soya, ground nuts and other produce as well as have increased access to water. Ninety-five percent of participating farmers also report greater yields, both for home consumption as well as for sale of surplus. Land resource management and restoration of degraded lands have also provided protection against floods, highlighting greater resilience of communities even in the face of increased extreme weather events.

A 2021 independent evaluation has confirmed that WFP interventions in Malawi have successfully helped communities adapt to a changing climate and enabled them to break out of the cycle of hunger. Some 95 percent of respondents reported higher crop production. Nine out of 10 said they felt better prepared to face natural hazards. The number of participants depending on humanitarian assistance has also decreased by 60 percent. To continue this resilience building pathway, WFP will continue working together with government, partners and communities themselves through this integrated package. In addition to resilience building, one of the key objectives of the resilience programme is to contribute to reducing humanitarian needs. In 2019, 19 percent (1 in 5) of resilience participants were also receiving humanitarian assistance. In 2022, only 3.6 percent (an 80 percent drop) were targeted by the lean season response.

An example of the positive impact of the resilience activities, in 2023, a few days after Cyclone Freddy hit the country:

The Chigwirigwidi village in the Traditional Authority Nazombe, Phalombe District, is an example of the positive impact of WFP's integrated resilience activities in Malawi. In March 2023 when Tropical Cyclone Freddy hit the Southern region of Malawi, those in Chigwirigwidi were able to better brace the impact of the storm and subsequent floods than neighboring villages thanks to their participation in WFP's integrated resilience package. The village sits at the bottom of a sloppy hill, making it vulnerable to water run-off. The local community had been participating in integrated resilience activities and had built trenches and stone bunds through FFA at the top of the hill. Thanks to these interventions, the community withstood Freddy's impact and wasn't flooded, thereby avoiding losses and damages from occurring.



Lessons learned

Malawi has faced several extreme weather events in the past decade, and projections show this trend will likely continue. In 2023, Tropical Cyclone Freddy impacted areas that were already suffering high levels of prolonged food insecurity, indicating that they had not fully recovered from previous crises including Tropical Storm Ana. The losses incurred resulted in a significantly larger 2022/2023 lean season both in terms of affected population as well as duration of humanitarian assistance required. The additional impacts of Tropical Cyclone Freddy at the end of the lean season have destroyed thousands of hectares of harvest, threatening to further compromise resilience and undermine hard-won development gains made in recent years.

However, in the past two years WFP has seen evidence that communities working with WFP on integrated resilience and livelihoods activities were more resilient in the face of the storms. For example, evidence from a 2022 post-flood assessment noted that as a result of participation in WFP's integrated resilience activities, targeted beneficiary households resorted to fewer and less severe negative coping mechanisms and were able to recover more quickly, meaning that the development gains made to building and maintaining their resilience were not lost.

Household-level surveys from 2022 also found that fifty-one percent of WFP beneficiaries who needed loans obtained them through VSLAs established as part of the livelihoods programming package and not through money lenders, thereby reducing the amount of debt an individual household accrued. This is critical for medium-term resilience, as households are not put in a negative spiral of debt, thereby perpetuating their vulnerability against shocks and stressors.

Surveyed WFP beneficiaries, often classified as the most vulnerable in the community, fared the same as better-off non-beneficiaries in the wake of the floods with regards to food consumption categories and livelihood coping strategies.

These examples highlight the critical importance of working through an integrated approach to resilience and climate change that puts the communities at the center, empowering them to forge their own path to ensuring sustainable food and nutrition security at household, community and eventually national levels by working to restore, maintain and protect ecosystems while at the same time increasing production and access to finance and income.

Additional resources

Chigwirigwidi resilience [video](#) (April 2023)

WFP Malawi integrated resilience evidence generation [report](#) (September 2021)

WFP Malawi Tropical Storm Ana post-floods assessment [fact sheet](#) (June 2022)