

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND SMALL HOLDER FARMERS IN MALAWI

Understanding poor people's experiences in climate  
change adaptation

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# Introduction

- Action Aid Malawi conducted study to understand the insights of poor farmers regarding climate change adaptation.
- While policy responses to global warming have been mainly driven by debates among scientists, the frontline have been largely neglected.
- A field study was conducted using participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA) 1 in two districts of Malawi,
  - Mphunga village in Salima, and Mulembwe village in Nsanje which both experience droughts and floods.
- A policy analysis was also conducted to understand the policy context relating to climate change adaptation.

# Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA)



# Understanding vulnerability

- PVA is a *systematic* process that *involves communities and other stakeholders* in an in-depth examination of their vulnerability and at the same time *empowers and motivates* them to take *appropriate action*.



# **CLIMATE CHANGE AND ADAPTATION CHALLENGES**

**- KEY MESSAGES FROM THE  
STUDY**

## Key message 1: Smallholder farmers experience changes in the climate which is reducing productivity

- Changing rainfall patterns and higher temperatures have forced farmers to shorten the growing season and switch to more expensive hybrid crops.
- Frequent droughts and floods are eroding assets and knowledge, leaving people more vulnerable to disaster.
- An upsurge in malaria and cholera requires women to spend more time tending to the sick and less time working their fields .
- Farmers are increasingly concerned about the impact of climate change on agriculture and food security. As expressed by one farmer in Salima district,  
*“ Food availability has been an issue over the years since the disasters began. Much as we experienced floods in those days, the impact was somehow not as severe. As time went by, there has been a drop in crop production due to frequent flooding and droughts. ”*

- Increased frequency and intensity of floods and droughts destroys and erodes assets which are the very means for adaptation.
- Farmers are left with no time to recover from previous impacts through either asset accumulation or acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary for adapting to future climate changes. Consequently, farmers are being subjected to continuous hunger and deeper cycles of poverty and vulnerability.
- *Lemisoni Ambulesi, 70, had a close encounter with death in the floods of January 2006. " The floods of over knee height carried me for about 900 metres. I am lucky to be alive and can say that the floods in recent years have increased in frequency and intensity as compared to when I was still a young man."* Lemisoni speaks on behalf of many farmers in Nsanje district whose livelihoods have been affected due to floods that are now considered an annual event.



- Clearly, farmers are now uncertain of when to plant.
- Farmers now opt for short-season hybrid maize varieties because the growing season is shorter.
- Rainfall patterns have hindered the growing of long-season local indigenous maize varieties.
- There are noticeable increase in diseases such as malaria, cholera and dysentery associated with changes in rainfall patterns, and this has created health challenges that are particularly affecting women.
- One female farmer described the workload that comes with caring for the sick and maintaining household hygiene. *“We now travel longer distances to fetch water and spend most of the time in health centres instead of working in our fields.”*

## Key message 2: Inappropriate government policies have undermined attempts to diversify

- Food security in Malawi is largely defined by the availability of maize or 'nsima' – the staple food. Although this has been influenced by climate change, it has also been encouraged through government policies to intensify maize production.
- Hybrid maize for example, has been promoted in Malawi since the early 1970s, supported through a credit scheme that offered subsidized inputs to farmers. When this collapsed in 1994, the share of land allocated to maize fell from 30% to 18%.
- Maize production has continued to fluctuate due to the removal of subsidies and the privatization of seed companies, causing an escalation in prices beyond the reach of smallholder farmers.
- Farming has become less viable because hybrid maize is capital intensive. In the long run, "only commercial farms will be able to survive as a result of climate change and government policy on seed," the participants argued.

# Key message 3: Development factors exacerbate climate change impacts

- The degradation of the environment through poor land use and deforestation is a serious concern, farmers are aware that these activities result in more floods and droughts but have failed to stop as there are few alternatives.
- They lament the role played by tobacco estates. Chipiza Kalemba, 84, explained, ***“ I suggest that the village headmen should approach traditional authority Dindi and urge him to develop laws that will regulate the cutting down of trees by tobacco estates that are situated in the upland areas from the source of the river. The laws should include enforcement of planting trees by estate owners as well as communities. Communities should also stop the practice of carelessly cutting down reeds that are growing along river banks. There were efforts by the local forestry assistant but people showed no interest to his messages.”***
- Existing forestry laws require tobacco estates to have a woodlot that is meant to be used for reforestation but this is not being enforced. ***“ Monitoring and evaluation of tobacco estates is a challenge for district staff because of lack of financial resources.”***
- Smallholder farmers are aware of the factors that contribute to climate change, but are not empowered to speak out to the tobacco estates, and also lack government support in terms of enforcing the laws that protect their forests.

## Key message 4: Climate change exposes the underlying causes of food insecurity

- Droughts and floods are exposing the crisis in livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Malawi.
- Flood-induced migration means that there are now many more people seeking work on the plantations than there are jobs available.
- Limited income opportunities in the face of increased floods and droughts and have forced women to engage in unsafe sex practices, exposing them to greater risk of HIV. *“girls as young as 13 are being forced into early marriage due to hunger, thus aggravating the impact of HIV and AIDS.”*
- In addition, the destruction of property and infrastructure places a huge burden on already strained health care systems. *“I am very worried about the future of the AIDS orphans that I am looking after and my family which depends on me. I am asking if ActionAid could help me purchase a garden of my own so that I can maintain and provide a better future for my family,” said Selimani Zaina, 79 years old victim of the 2005 drought.*

Key message 5: Existing local government capacity cannot support the challenges smallholder farmers face in adapting to climate change

- Lack of knowledge of disaster and environmental management policies, limitations on funding and damaged equipment within the district is weakening support towards community adaptation. “*The District Disaster Preparedness committee has not been functioning efficiently due to lack of resources.*” sentiments expressed by a member of the District Assembly in Salima.
- The current limitations to adaptation are poor formulation of policies, lack of knowledge of policies, and their lack of implementation at the district level.

# Local government capacity challenges

- The National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) for Malawi, drafted by the Environmental Affairs Department, is the key guide to adaptation priorities. As it stands, there are concerns that NAPA exists in isolation of other key sectors, for example, the document currently addresses issues of agriculture and environment, but health and gender are ignored.
- District staff in both Nsanje and Salima were ignorant of its existence, a situation that confirms that not all sectors were involved in drafting the document. This has far reaching consequences for its implementation.
- There is lack of intersectoral coordination that currently affects implementation of climate-related activities. The planning and management of climate change and disaster management is currently carried out on a sectoral basis and the involvement of local communities is limited.
- The absence of an overall planning and management strategy, developed with the participation of community users, hampers successful adaptation. There are also currently limited skills and resources at the local level to implement new policies.

# Conclusions

- Smallholder farmers in Malawi have been exposed to increased droughts and floods, tremendously affecting food security. Several adaptation strategies, including changes in crops grown and changes in growing patterns, have been undertaken in response.
- However, smallholder farmers have faced limitations in adapting to climate change because they lack capacity including knowledge, skills and money. Current government policies on hybrid maize and privatisation of seed companies have made agriculture unprofitable for smallholder farmers.
- Moreover, implementation of NAPA faces capacity constraints at the district levels and lack of coordination among various sectors. The overarching problem is the fact that NAPA seems to exist in isolation of other sector policies.

# CONCLUSIONS CONTD

- A multisectoral approach is imperative, beginning at the community level with the smallholder farmers who are directly affected by climate change. These farmers need skills, knowledge and access to credit for addressing short and long-term needs of diversifying from maize into other crops.
- The Hyogo Framework for Action, adopted at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Japan 2005, offers comprehensive disaster reduction policies, that should be implemented at local and national levels as an urgent adaptation measure.
- Failure to take decisive action to protect Africa's poor farmers from destruction of livelihoods arising from climate change can be considered a violation of the right to food. Under international human rights law, the obligation to act rests both with African governments, and with the carbon emitting nations.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
ATTENTION**