



Credit: CARE International/James Chembekeza

In response to tropical cyclone Freddy, CARE Malawi & its partners distributed hygiene kits and dignity kits to women and girls.

Freddy: The Worst Cyclone to Hit Malawi - So Far

In 2023, a record-breaking cyclone created havoc in Southern Malawi and displaced more than half a million people. The vulnerable country needs support to recover, but until now limited international assistance has been received.

In the early evening of March 12th, 2023, a cyclone reached Malawi. It was Tropical Cyclone Freddy (TCF), the longest-lived tropical cyclone on record globally. For almost a week, the country saw six months' worth of rainfall, causing devastating flooding and mudslides.

Southern Malawi was hardest hit, with floods washing away houses, bridges and damaging

crops which were at the stage of maturation. The disaster caused 679 deaths, while 537 people went missing. In total, approximately 2,3 million people were affected including more than 600,000 people who were displaced from their homes.

The government responded with rescue and relief operations with the support of various humanitarian actors. Two months after the cyclone, 1.8 million people were reached with support.¹ This included some 1.2 million people who received safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene items. About 550,000 learners were given access to education again, while around 650,000

¹ <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/malawi/malawi-cholera-tropical-cyclone-freddy-response-dashboard-may-2023>

people were reached with food and livelihood assistance, including cash. About 100,000 people whose houses were damaged by floods and mudslides received shelter materials and non-food items.

But only a fraction of the \$116 million required to respond to these immediate needs was received and 18 months after the disaster, the devastation can still be seen across the affected region with some of those displaced still in temporary shelters.

International support in Malawi is needed more than ever

The cost of loss and damage from TCF in Malawi was estimated at \$507 million while the total cost of recovery and reconstruction was set to \$680 million according to the government's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) from April 2023.²

Physical damages were valued at \$347 million,

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/malawi/malawi-2023-tropical-cyclone-freddy-post-disaster-needs-assessment-april-2023>

with the most affected sector being infrastructure, followed by water and sanitation. The effects on social sectors were estimated at \$175 million, with the highest effects experienced in housing, followed by education. Moreover, at least 200,000 hectares of crops were severely affected by TCF, while 1.4 million livestock were killed or injured. The disaster is also estimated to have caused widespread production losses.

It is important to note that not all losses and damages are of an economic nature. Non-economic losses such as the psychological impact of the cyclone or the loss of culture and knowledge when people and infrastructure are washed away are hard to quantify, yet critical for impacted communities. In some instances, there are overlaps between economic and non-economic losses, for example when there is a loss of ancestral land, which can be linked to loss of local knowledge and social relations as well as to economic losses.

In June 2023, the Government, commenced the development of a National Recovery Framework. In connection with this, it updated the as-



Credit: Malawi Red Cross Society

Man displaced by tropical cyclone Freddy, still living in temporary shelter, September 2024.

assessment of the needs to fully recover from TCF to \$873 million. The increase is mainly due to the addition of food security, which was not included in the PDNA³.

Anticipatory action saved lives and reduced loss and damage

In a country like Malawi, affected by a succession of shocks over recent years, the ability to rebuild and foster climate resilience is limited. Before a recovery plan has a chance of being fully implemented, another disaster tends to strike. As a result, the government and its humanitarian partners have been developing a proactive approach by investing time and resources in anticipatory actions (AA). These are measures that are taken between when a forecast is received and when a disaster hits. During the short time frame available to act, responders and humanitarians perform a range of tasks such as supporting early evacuation including of livestock, putting up plastic sheets on houses, digging dykes or cleaning drainage systems.

Malawi Red Cross Society and CARE International are among the key actors working on AA in Malawi. Their aim is to prevent predictable climate hazards – such as storms, floods, and droughts – from escalating into humanitarian disasters. They decide to act based on a weather forecast or a collective risk analysis of when, where, and how events will unfold.

In Malawi, AA programmes did save lives during TCF, especially compared to previous cyclones, even if they were not always widespread or consistent. One study showed that people living in areas with previous AA programming increased the likelihood of hearing, believing, and acting upon early warnings by almost 20 percent, compared to communities without such programming.⁴

Funding for AA remains limited, yet with another disaster potentially around the corner, needs will only increase. Malawi Red Cross Society is

³ Note by Department of Disaster Management Affairs: 'Disaster recovery interventions following the impacts of tropical cyclone Freddy'.

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/malawi/comparative-study-early-warnings-and-early-actions-tropical-cyclone-freddy-southern-malawi-areas-and-without-previous-anticipatory-action-programming-quantitative-data-findings-and-analysis>

currently working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on pre-positioning funds which can be activated for early action. Additional funding for AA could be used to improve early warning systems, accelerate community trainings or simply to buy and store equipment that can save lives.

Malawi is vulnerable towards climate change

Malawi is a small, landlocked country in south-eastern Africa, with a population of 20 million people, of which 70 percent live below the international poverty line. The country's economic growth is significantly affected by climate change. Indeed, Malawi is ranked 163 out of 182 on the ND-GAIN index which measures a country's climate change vulnerabilities as well as its readiness to adapt.

Without significant further investments, the impacts of climate change could result in a 20 percent loss of GDP by 2040, according to the World Bank. Climate change is also reducing the resilience of households and could increase poverty rates in the country, potentially pushing another two million people into poverty over the next 10 years.⁵ Cyclone Freddy alone led to losses and damages of more than 3 percent of Malawi's GDP.

The government has secured \$250 million in grants from the World Bank to implement a Re-

⁵ [Climate-Informed Economic Development Key to Malawi's Future Growth and Resilience \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/climate-informed-economic-development-key-to-malawis-future-growth-and-resilience)



Credit: Malawi Red Cross Society

Red Cross volunteers assist in search and rescue operations after tropical cyclone Freddy displaced families and washed away their homes

gional Climate Resilience Project “which aims to increase resilience to water-related climate impacts”. The project includes support for a range of activities such as reconstruction of roads and bridges, land and forest restoration, construction of dykes, early warning systems, flood and drought vulnerability analysis, and district-led resilience building.⁶

The project will support resilience-building across the country, with only a part of it aimed at supporting the recovery from TCF. As the project provides the main response from the international community to TCF so far it leaves the Malawians with a funding gap in the order of 5-700 million USD – expenses that will have to be borne by the government and the affected communities.

Loss and damage must be part of the finance goal to be set at COP29

At the next UN climate change conference, COP 29 in November, all eyes will be on climate finance. A new finance target, known as the New Collective Quantified Goal, is due to be agreed. One of the issues in the negotiations is if funding for loss and damage funding shall be included in the new finance goal, and if a separate sub-goal for this shall be set.

⁶ <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P181308>

A clear goal for international support to vulnerable countries for loss and damage is indeed important. As the case of TCF shows much more international assistance is required to countries like Malawi to deal with concrete climate-related disasters. In the absence, the bill will end up being paid by some of the poorest people of the World who have done the least to create global warming. Per capita emissions of CO₂ from fossil fuels in Malawi are at 0.1 tonnes a year – or about 50 times less than current World average. The Loss and Damage fund established at COP 28 in 2023, is raising hope for more climate finance to countries like Malawi. But the fund has yet to be fully operationalised and only \$661 million has been pledged⁷ to the fund so far – a drop in the ocean considering the scale of climate change impacts on countries like Malawi.

⁷ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/bodies/funds-and-financial-entities/loss-and-damage-fund-joint-interim-secretariat/pledges-to-the-loss-and-damage-fund>

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