

Baseline household survey to inform the anticipatory action pilot to flooding and dry spells in Malawi

Anticipatory action (AA) involves thinking and acting ahead of predictable problems. Therefore, AA offers a prime opportunity to proactively engage local communities, not as recipients of post-disaster emergency assistance but as partners in the definition of mitigating interventions that are appropriate in their context. OCHA, therefore, commissioned a local research team in Malawi (Research Insight Learning) to study and learn from the experience of families struck by floods and dry spells, including:

- a. Whether they rely on information to “know” in advance if and when these hazards will occur;
- b. If there are decisions and actions they take to get ready that might reduce their suffering;
- c. If they find support in their communities and from local and national authorities to prepare, endure and recover from these shocks;
- d. If there are decisions and actions they would like but are constrained to take (ie., lack the resources and capacity);
- e. And what kind of warning and help they would prefer to receive, how and when, to fare better in the face of these risks.

The objectives of the study were to:

- a. Incorporate the knowledge and expectations of vulnerable households from the outset of the pilot;
- b. Improve the pertinence, quality, and timing of the anticipatory action framework that the United Nations Country Team is developing to predict floods and dry spells, and trigger the release of funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund for the implementation of a pre-agreed plan (anticipatory action framework);
- c. Pre-target the locations and beneficiaries which will result in time gains once the AA framework and lead to better outcomes (i.e., helping the most vulnerable and risk-exposed)

The key findings of the study are:

1. People generally know that a shock is coming. They get information through some formal or informal channel. So, shocks hardly come as a surprise.
2. People tend to change their actions only after the shock occurs. Furthermore, people only change their actions after significant impact has taken place.
3. People are grateful of the early warning messages that they receive. However, they would like this to be accompanied by advisories on actions to take. In addition, advisories coupled with capacity strengthening to take these actions is welcomed.
4. For floods, the major impact is on the loss of capital, specifically the loss of housing, crops, and livestock. Floods are most commonly associated with rising water levels near the river and lake, much less so to excessive rainfall.
5. For dry spells, the major impacts include the loss of crops, reduced food security, and strained livelihoods. High food prices in this context was also noted as a notable stress after a dry spell.
6. Dry spells of most concern in January and February. The impact of this is quite long lasting, ranging from 1 month up to 1 year. Notably, there is little differentiation between dry spells and drought in respondent feedback.
7. Floods of most concern between January and March, especially February. Impact is usually felt for 3 to 5 months after the shock.
8. Assistance generally comes after the shock, to a lesser extent during the shock, and even less so before the shock.
9. Common coping strategies (across shock types) include casual work, reducing meals (frequency and quantities), borrowing money, depleting savings, and the sale of assets. In this context, cash-based transfers, and access to much needed non-food items, such as building materials, were recommended by the respondents.
10. Communities encourage the strengthening of local institutions and working through these to enhance their risk managing strategies, considerate not only of local DRM committees and village heads, but also village saving and loan groups, that can support planning and action before a shock.