



SUSTAINABLE
FUTURES



The global COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of communities in Malawi: Policy Brief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief summarises the findings of the Whose Crisis? research project which aimed to understand lived experiences of communities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi. The brief outlines key messages to help

stakeholders improve future emergency responses. More coordination among sectors and strong engagement with vulnerable communities can lead to more effective interventions.

BACKGROUND

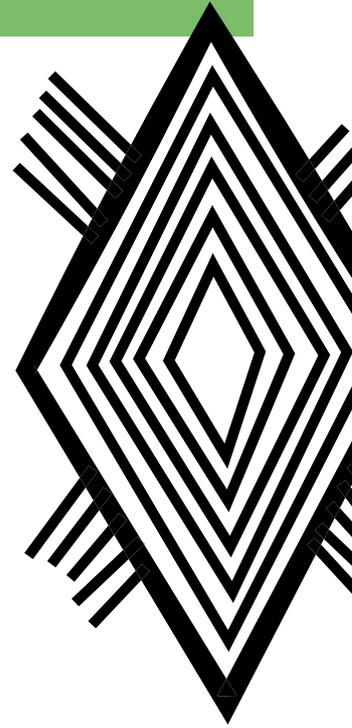
The Whose Crisis? research project aimed to amplify the voices of the under-represented communities in the global South. Researchers used culturally responsive, participatory, and art-based research methods, such as focus group discussions, drama and role plays, letter writing, in-depth interviews, songs, poetry, story-telling, and community fora to facilitate the engagement.

Two communities in Malawi were engaged in the study: Shanganani Community in Mchinji district (Central Malawi) and Mbando Community in Machinga district (Southern Malawi). The Mbando community is a remote rural area along Lake Chilwa whose population is mainly involved in smallholder farming and fishing. The Shanganani community is right at the border between Malawi and Zambia, with its population predominantly engaged in cross-border trade and small-scale businesses.

COVID-19 INTERVENTIONS

In Malawi the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with pre-existing health challenges such as tuberculosis, malaria and HIV and AIDS, increasing the pressure on the healthcare system. The country adopted standard public health interventions to contain the spread on the virus which included school closures, social distancing, face coverings, decongesting public areas, public transport, and workplaces as well as testing and

isolating symptomatic cases. Other interventions included risk communication in different languages. The response was managed by 15 multisectoral working groups in charge of different policy areas that included the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. The National Disaster Preparedness and Relief Committee was responsible for overseeing and coordinating the working groups.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

The disruption caused by COVID-19 measures to contain the virus had significant negative impact on vulnerable livelihoods resulting in losses of income and rising poverty, and food insecurity. Most households in Malawi depend on agriculture or manual labour for their income. Restrictions limited the ability of farmers to sell in local markets or to traders. Border closures also reduced trade with neighbouring countries which is an important source of farm income. Restrictions also affected remittances from South Africa.

Gender related inequalities and injustices escalated during the pandemic. School dropout rates as well as the incidence of unplanned pregnancies and early (child) marriages increased among girls. It is expected that most of these girls will not return to school due to childcare and work responsibilities or lack of financial means to continue education. Reports of child sexual abuse also increased during this period.

“This shows that the impacts of the pandemic will remain with the community way beyond the pandemic.”

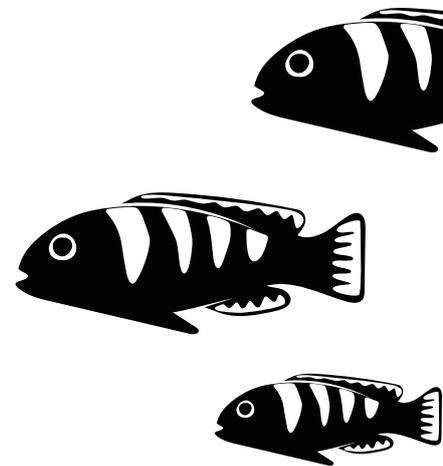
TDJ Teacher, Shanganani

Local health centres were overwhelmed with high numbers of patients seeking care and treatment. People began to avoid district hospitals due to the belief that there was “deliberate spreading” of the virus at hospitals. Most communities used social media as their main source of information which led to the spread of misinformation about the virus and the public health response.

COVID-19 prevention measures also disrupted social and cultural activities that provide psychosocial support during crises. Funerals, weddings, and religious practices were restricted making it difficult for communities to interact.

“Life has changed in its entirety; no more greetings by handshake, no more hugging, no more hand holding, no more ordinary groups, no more playing games like bawo. The very foundations of community oneness have been shaken by the pandemic.”

Discussion Chiefs, Shanganani



- The Government of Malawi must strengthen its efforts to encourage children to return to school especially girls. Strategies should include awareness campaigns, financial assistance, and school feeding.

- Crises responses must promote strong community engagement as this enables stakeholders to better understand local needs and capacities. This will improve the effectiveness and feasibility of interventions. Accountability mechanisms must also be created to ensure transparency and sound financial management.

KEY MESSAGES