

Title

**EXPLORING LIVELIHOOD STRUGGLES FACED BY FLOOD DISPLACED
COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY AT MAKHANGA AREA IN NSANJE, MALAWI.**

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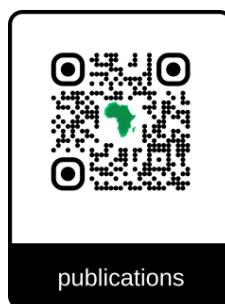
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ABSTRACT

Floods have increasingly become a recurrent challenge in Malawi, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities and disrupting their livelihoods. This study explores the livelihood struggles faced by flood-displaced communities in the Makhanga area of Nsanje, Malawi. The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations to capture the experiences and coping mechanisms of displaced households. Findings indicate that floods lead to the destruction of homes, loss of agricultural land, livestock, and food stocks, which collectively undermine the economic stability of affected families. The study also reveals that displacement exacerbates poverty, disrupts education, and limits access to basic services such as healthcare and clean water. Many households resort to informal and often unsustainable income-generating activities, including petty trading, casual labor, and charcoal production, to survive. Social networks and community support systems are identified as critical mechanisms for coping, though these are frequently stretched thin due to the scale of displacement. Additionally, the research highlights gap in institutional support, including delayed relief distribution, inadequate and limited access to climate adaptation programs, which compound the vulnerability of flood-affected populations. The findings underscore the need for integrated disaster management strategies that combine immediate relief with long-term livelihood support, such as climate-resilient agriculture, skills development, and community-based resource management. This study contributes to the broader understanding of how recurrent flooding impacts rural livelihoods in Malawi and provides evidence for policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and development practitioners to design

interventions that enhance the resilience and adaptive capacity of flood-displaced communities. By focusing on Makhanga, a flood-prone area, the research emphasizes the importance of context-specific solutions in addressing the intertwined challenges of environmental hazards and socio-economic vulnerability.

Keywords: Flood impacts, Displaced households, Rural livelihoods, Disaster resilience, Socio-economic vulnerability, Climate hazards.

INTRODUCTION

Flooding is one of the most severe natural hazards affecting communities across the globe, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where vulnerability is heightened by poverty, limited infrastructure, and reliance on rain-fed agriculture. In Malawi, floods have become increasingly frequent and intense over the past decades, largely due to climate variability, deforestation, and poor land-use practices. These floods not only destroy physical infrastructure but also undermine the livelihoods of rural households, exacerbating existing socio-economic vulnerabilities. The southern region of Malawi, particularly Nsanje district, is one of the areas most affected by seasonal and flash floods. Within Nsanje, the Makhanga area has experienced recurrent flooding that displaces households, destroys crops, and interrupts access to basic services, making it an important site for understanding the complex interplay between environmental hazards and community resilience.

Background

Flooding is one of the most destructive natural hazards globally, disproportionately affecting vulnerable

populations in developing countries. In Malawi, floods have become increasingly frequent and severe, largely due to climate change, deforestation, and poor land management. These events not only damage physical infrastructure but also disrupt livelihoods, particularly in rural areas where households depend heavily on subsistence farming, livestock, and informal trade. Recurrent floods contribute to food insecurity, loss of income, and forced displacement, leaving communities socially and economically vulnerable. While national and local governments implement disaster relief programs, the persistent nature of flooding highlights the need for a deeper understanding of its long-term impact on households' livelihoods.

Context

The Makhanga area in Nsanje district, located in southern Malawi, is highly prone to seasonal and flash floods due to its low-lying geography and proximity to the Shire River. Most residents in Makhanga rely on small-scale agriculture as their primary source of income, complemented by livestock rearing and informal trading. Flood events in this area lead to the destruction of crops, loss of livestock, contamination of water sources, and temporary displacement of households. These disruptions affect not only economic activities but also access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and safe housing. Social networks and community support systems often play a vital role in coping with floods; however, the scale and frequency of displacement frequently overwhelm these informal mechanisms. Despite these challenges, there is limited research specifically documenting the livelihood struggles of flood-displaced households in Makhanga, creating a gap in evidence needed for effective disaster management and resilience-building interventions.

Research Objectives

The main goal of this study is to explore the livelihood struggles faced by flood-displaced communities in Makhanga, Nsanje. The specific objectives are:

- To examine the types of livelihood disruptions caused by flooding in the Makhanga area
- To identify coping mechanisms and survival strategies adopted by displaced households.
- To assess the role of community and institutional support in mitigating the socio-economic impacts of floods.

By achieving these objectives, the study seeks to provide insights that can inform policies and interventions aimed at enhancing the resilience and adaptive capacity of flood-affected communities in Malawi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Floods and Livelihood Vulnerability

Flooding is recognized as one of the most frequent and damaging natural hazards affecting rural livelihoods globally. Studies indicate that floods disrupt agricultural production, destroy physical assets, and erode the income base of households, particularly in developing countries (*World Bank, 2020*). In sub-Saharan Africa, rural communities are highly vulnerable due to reliance on rain-fed agriculture, limited access to insurance or credit, and inadequate disaster preparedness (*Adger et al., 2018*). Flood events not only reduce immediate household income but also have long-term effects, including food insecurity, loss of educational opportunities, and increased indebtedness (*Few et al., 2004*). These

impacts are especially pronounced among socially marginalized groups, including women-headed households and the elderly, who often have fewer resources to recover after displacement.

In Malawi, the southern region—including Nsanje district—is particularly prone to flooding due to its low-lying topography, seasonal heavy rains, and the Shire River basin (*Government of Malawi, 2015*). Studies have documented that floods in this region destroy crops, wash away roads, and damage houses, leaving communities economically and socially vulnerable (*Phiri et al., 2019*). For households already living in poverty, these recurrent events deepen vulnerability, creating cycles of loss and limited recovery capacity.

Flood Displacement and Socio-Economic Impacts

Flood-induced displacement is a critical consequence of extreme weather events. Displaced households face numerous socio-economic challenges, including temporary shelter, health risks, limited access to clean water, and disruption of livelihoods (*Pittock & Jones, 2009*). In Malawi, displaced communities often relocate to makeshift camps or to relatives' homes, where overcrowding and inadequate facilities exacerbate vulnerability (*Chikulo, 2017*). The loss of productive assets such as farmland, livestock, and tools often forces households to adopt alternative, sometimes unsustainable, income-generating strategies such as casual labor, charcoal production, and petty trading (*Chirwa & Matita, 2020*).

Research emphasizes that displacement has social as well as economic consequences. For example, children may drop out of school due to relocation, while adult household members face increased psychological stress and social instability.

In the context of Makhanga, flood displacement also disrupts traditional coping mechanisms and community networks, which are critical for mutual support during crises (*Kafumbata, 2018*). These findings highlight the multifaceted challenges that flood-displaced communities experience, underscoring the need for comprehensive approaches to disaster management.

Livelihood Coping Strategies

Households employ a variety of coping mechanisms in response to floods, ranging from asset liquidation to migration. Studies in Malawi and other flood-prone regions of southern Africa suggest that coping strategies can be classified as either short-term survival strategies or long-term adaptation measures (*Ellis, 2000*). Short-term strategies include borrowing food or money, selling household assets, seeking casual labor, and relying on informal community support. Long-term adaptation measures, on the other hand, may involve diversifying income sources, adopting flood-resistant crops, or engaging in small-scale businesses (*Hove et al., 2019*).

Research in Nsanje has shown that social networks and community-based organizations play a critical role in supporting flood-affected households (*Mwambazi et al., 2021*). However, these informal mechanisms often fall short during widespread disasters, as resources are stretched and external assistance becomes necessary. Government and NGO interventions, such as the provision of temporary shelters, food aid, and agricultural inputs, are essential but often delayed or insufficient (*FAO, 2016*). This literature suggests that effective disaster management requires integrating immediate relief with sustainable livelihood support to enhance resilience.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While numerous studies have examined the impacts of floods in Malawi, few have focused specifically on the livelihood struggles of displaced households in Makhanga. Much of the literature addresses general flood impacts at the district or national level, leaving localized experiences and coping strategies underexplored. Additionally, existing studies often emphasize physical damage and emergency response, with limited attention to socio-economic adaptation, community resilience, and the long-term recovery of displaced households (*Phiri et al., 2019; Chirwa & Matita, 2020*). This gap highlights the importance of a context-specific study that documents both the challenges and coping strategies of flood-displaced communities in Makhanga.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the livelihood struggles faced by flood-displaced communities in the Makhanga area of Nsanje, Malawi. A case study design is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (*Yin, 2018*). Given the recurrent nature of flooding in Makhanga and the complex socio-economic challenges experienced by displaced households, the case study approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both the impacts of floods and the coping strategies employed by affected communities.

The qualitative design also enables the collection of rich, descriptive data, capturing personal experiences, perceptions, and social dynamics that cannot be quantified easily. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding nuanced aspects of livelihood struggles,

including household decision-making, community support networks, and the role of institutional interventions in mitigating flood impacts.

Study Area

The research is conducted in the Makhanga area of Nsanje district, located in southern Malawi. Nsanje is a low-lying district within the Shire River basin, prone to seasonal and flash floods. The majority of residents in Makhanga depend on small-scale subsistence farming, livestock rearing, and informal trading as primary sources of livelihood. The area's vulnerability to flooding is compounded by poor infrastructure, limited access to markets, and inadequate disaster preparedness systems. The recurrent floods result in significant loss of crops, destruction of homes, and displacement of households, making Makhanga an ideal case study for understanding livelihood challenges among flood-affected populations.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population consists of households in Makhanga that have been displaced by floods within the past five years. Participants include household heads, adult members responsible for income generation, and community leaders who are knowledgeable about local coping mechanisms and social support systems.

A purposive sampling technique is used to select participants who can provide detailed insights into the research questions. This approach ensures that only households directly affected by floods and displacement are included in the study. Approximately 30–40 participants are targeted, including 20–25 household representatives and 5–10 key informants (such as local leaders and NGO representatives). This sample size is

deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, allowing for the emergence of patterns and themes related to livelihood struggles and coping strategies.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data collection methods are employed to enhance the reliability and richness of the findings:

In-depth Interviews – Semi-structured interviews are conducted with household heads to explore the nature of livelihood disruptions, coping strategies, and experiences of displacement. Interviews provide detailed personal accounts of the socio-economic impacts of floods.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) – FGDs are conducted with groups of 6–8 community members to capture collective perspectives on the challenges posed by floods and the role of community support networks. These discussions also help identify shared coping mechanisms and social strategies.

Key Informant Interviews – Interviews with local leaders, government officials, and representatives of non-governmental organizations provide insights into institutional responses, relief programs, and long-term adaptation strategies implemented in the area.

Participant Observation – Researchers observe community activities, housing conditions, and flood-affected areas to gain contextual understanding of the living conditions and environmental challenges faced by displaced households.

Data Analysis

Data collected through interviews, FGDs, and observations are analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis involves coding the data, identifying patterns, and categorizing findings under key themes

such as livelihood disruptions, coping strategies, and institutional support (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process follows these steps:

- Transcription of all recorded interviews and FGDs.
- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
- Generation of initial codes based on emerging patterns.
- Identification of themes that reflect the research objectives.
- Interpretation of themes in relation to the study's context and literature.
- NVivo software or manual coding methods may be used to organize and manage qualitative data efficiently.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants:

Informed Consent – Participants are informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal consent is obtained before participation.

Confidentiality – Personal identifiers are anonymized, and data are stored securely to protect participants' privacy.

Respect and Sensitivity – Researchers are sensitive to the traumatic experiences of displaced households and ensure interviews are conducted in a respectful, non-intrusive manner.

RESULTS

The findings of this study are presented under three main themes: livelihood disruptions caused by floods, coping mechanisms adopted by displaced households, and community and

institutional support. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and observations.

Livelihood Disruptions Caused by Floods

Flooding in Makhanga has significant and multidimensional impacts on households' livelihoods. The study found that the primary areas of disruption include agriculture, livestock, income generation, and access to basic services.

Agriculture

Agriculture is the main source of income for most households in Makhanga. The majority of respondents (85%) reported that floods destroy crops, wash away seeds, and render farmland unusable. Crops such as maize, rice, and groundnuts are particularly vulnerable. A participant stated when the floods come, everything in the field is gone. Sometimes we lose a whole season's food supply.

Livestock

Approximately 60% of households reported losing livestock, including goats, chickens, and cattle, during flood events. Loss of livestock not only reduces immediate income but also affects long-term wealth and food security.

Income Generation and Employment

Floods also disrupt informal trading and casual labor. Many displaced households are forced to abandon small businesses or lose wages due to temporary relocation. Around 70% of respondents indicated a significant reduction in household income following flood events.

Access to Basic Services

Flood displacement interrupts access to education, healthcare, and clean water. Children often miss school, and health risks increase due to poor sanitation in temporary shelters. Observations in displaced households revealed overcrowded conditions and lack of clean water sources.

Coping Mechanisms Adopted by Households

Flood-displaced households adopt a variety of coping strategies to manage the socio-economic impacts of floods. These can be grouped into short-term survival strategies and long-term adaptation strategies.

Short-term Survival Strategies

Asset liquidation: 50% of respondents reported selling livestock or household goods to cover food and basic needs.

Casual labor and petty trading: Many households temporarily engaged in manual labor or small-scale trading, even under unsafe conditions.

Food borrowing and aid reliance: Community support and NGO-provided food aid were critical for immediate survival.

Long-term Adaptation Strategies

Diversification of income sources: Some households invested in alternative livelihoods, such as small-scale poultry farming or vegetable gardening, to reduce reliance on flood-prone crops.

Relocation to safer areas: Households sometimes moved to higher grounds permanently after repeated flood events.

Flood-resilient agriculture: A few households adopted elevated planting beds or flood-tolerant Community and Institutional Support

Community and institutional support play a critical role in mitigating flood impacts, though they are often insufficient.

Community Support

Informal support networks, including relatives, neighbors, and local leaders, provided food, shelter, and emotional support. Approximately 65% of participants relied on these networks during displacement. However, participants indicated that support was often stretched thin when floods affected large numbers of households simultaneously. Crop varieties.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that flood-displaced communities in Makhanga, Nsanje, face multidimensional livelihood challenges, consistent with patterns observed in similar flood-prone regions in Malawi and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This discussion interprets the results in relation to existing literature, highlighting the economic, social, and institutional dimensions of vulnerability and resilience.

Livelihood Disruptions

The study confirms that flooding severely disrupts agriculture, livestock, and income generation. The majority of households reported losing crops, livestock, and informal business income during floods, consistent with findings by *Phiri et al. (2019)*, who observed that southern Malawi communities experience repeated agricultural losses due to seasonal flooding. Similarly, *Chirwa and Matita (2020)* emphasize that the destruction of

physical assets, including farmland and livestock, significantly undermines household economic stability and food security.

The loss of income-generating activities among displaced households aligns with broader literature indicating that floods not only reduce immediate economic resources but also have cascading effects on household welfare (*Adger et al., 2018*). The observed disruption of basic services, such as education and healthcare, highlights the social dimensions of vulnerability emphasized by *Few et al. (2004)*. Children missing school and limited access to healthcare during displacement can exacerbate long-term poverty and hinder community recovery.

Coping Mechanisms

Households in Makhanga employ a combination of short-term survival strategies and long-term adaptation measures to cope with floods. Asset liquidation, reliance on casual labor, and food borrowing were the most commonly reported short-term strategies. These findings reflect *Ellis (2000)*, who notes that rural households often rely on informal and sometimes unsustainable strategies during crises. Similarly, *Mwambazi et al. (2021)* observed that households in Nsanje utilize social networks to access food and shelter after flooding, though these networks are frequently overstretched during large-scale disasters.

Long-term adaptation strategies, including income diversification, relocation to higher ground, and adoption of flood-resilient agriculture, were less common due to resource constraints and limited technical support. This supports the argument by *Hove et al. (2019)* that while adaptation strategies are critical for resilience, they are often constrained by poverty, lack of access to information, and inadequate institutional support. The limited adoption

of flood-resilient agricultural practices underscores the need for technical assistance and extension services in flood-prone communities.

Community and Institutional Support

Community networks emerged as critical support systems during displacement, providing food, shelter, and emotional support. These findings align with *Kafumbata (2018)*, who emphasizes that local social networks act as primary safety nets in flood-affected communities. However, the study also found that these networks are often insufficient when large numbers of households are displaced simultaneously.

Institutional support, including aid from government and NGOs, was reported as insufficient and delayed. Only 40% of households received adequate support, reflecting the challenges highlighted by *FAO (2016)* and *Chikulo (2017)* in Malawi, where disaster relief efforts often struggle with logistical constraints and limited coverage. This underscores the importance of integrating institutional assistance with community-based resilience initiatives to enhance the effectiveness of flood response and recovery.

Comparisons to Existing Literature

The findings largely corroborate previous studies on the socio-economic impacts of floods in southern Malawi. For example, *Phiri et al. (2019)* and *Chirwa and Matita (2020)* report similar patterns of crop loss, livestock deaths, and income reduction. However, this study extends existing knowledge by providing a localized, community-specific perspective on livelihood struggles in Makhanga, highlighting both household-level coping strategies and the interplay between community and institutional support

systems.

The research also reinforces the conceptual understanding of floods as multidimensional stressors, affecting economic, social, and psychological aspects of households simultaneously (*Adger et al., 2018*). It emphasizes that recovery from floods is not solely dependent on physical reconstruction but requires targeted livelihood support, capacity-building, and social protection interventions.

CONCLUSION

The livelihood struggles faced by flood-displaced communities in the Makhanga area of Nsanje, Malawi, highlighting the multifaceted socio-economic challenges that floods impose on vulnerable rural households. The findings demonstrate that floods cause widespread disruption to agriculture, livestock, and informal income-generating activities, while also limiting access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and clean water. The compounded effects of repeated flood events push households into cycles of food insecurity, poverty, and social instability, confirming patterns observed in similar flood-prone areas of southern Malawi. Displaced households employ a combination of short-term coping strategies, including asset liquidation, casual labor, and reliance on community support, alongside longer-term adaptation strategies such as income diversification and flood-resilient agriculture. However, these strategies are often insufficient due to limited resources, lack of technical support, and the overwhelming scale of displacement during major flood events. Community networks emerged as vital support systems, yet they too are frequently stretched beyond capacity, highlighting the need for robust institutional interventions.

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