‘WHAT I VALUED MOST AND APPRECIATED IS NOW LOST’

MESSAGES ABOUT LOSS AND DAMAGE FROM PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AT HEIGHTENED RISK FROM CLIMATE-FUELLED EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

“Since the cyclone Idai, strong winds and thunder still terrify us.”
– Innocencia Njoringo, Chipinge, Zimbabwe.

“What I valued most and appreciated .... is now lost. My life is now at a risk, I really do not know what to do. I would love to go upland, but it needs money....”
– Joyce Luka, Chikwawa, Malawi.
The insights, case studies and recommendations contained in this short report are the result of conversations with people who have suffered and who continue to suffer loss and damage due to weather events fuelled by climate change. Oxfam is indebted to the people of Mbweza, Joliji and Chilindine villages in Chikwawa, Malawi and Ndladzo village, Wards 9 and 10 in Chipinge, Zimbabwe for sharing their stories and experiences. You can watch video stories from the communities by using the QR code.

INSIGHTS

- There are five dimensions to loss and damage: psychological, cultural, social, economic and environmental. An individual is likely to experience psychological distress such as trauma, depression or anxiety due to the death or injury of members of their family or the community, often in chaotic and frightening circumstances; disrupted cultural identity due to loss and damage to cultural heritage; broken social connections due to the death of family and community members, displacement or loss and damage to social structures e.g. schools; economic loss due to loss and damage to belongings, homes, cattle, gardens, etc.; and environmental loss, for example when topsoil is washed away or wells become polluted.

- Therefore, as a concept, loss and damage comprises intangible aspects, such as psychological distress and cultural and social disruption and dislocation, as well as tangible loss and damage to property, belongings and livelihoods.

- Intangible loss and damage will differ from person to person; women, men and children and different societies and cultures will have unique experiences of this kind of loss.

- Loss and damage is not a one-off event, but rather is an experience that persists over time with cumulative impacts. For example, persistent psychological distress can lead to the loss of livelihoods and long-term poverty; and children who lose their parents, and parents who lose their children, may never know how their loved ones died or be able to bury and mourn them.

- The deaths of family, friends and community members in often terrifying circumstances bring many complexities that affect people’s long-term psychological well-being. If land is flooded, even when the bodies of loved ones are recovered it may not be possible to bury them for days until the floodwater subsides. There may be no facilities for keeping bodies and delayed burial rituals may conflict with religious or cultural beliefs. Where the bodies of loved ones are lost, mourning and burial rites may not take place or be limited in ways that inhibit recovery and closure for survivors. Where children are orphaned, survivors often struggle to explain to them what has happened to their parents. In some places, when there is no body the law may require a period of up to 10 years to pass before a person can be registered as dead. The loss of gravestones in storms and floods can also open up griefing for past deaths.

- Existing stigma linked to talking about psychosocial and mental health, language constraints and the confusion and disruption caused by extreme weather events may mean that mental health issues are not addressed, leading to chronic ill health and disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- African leaders, civil society groups, activists and negotiators should be equipped with an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of people who are suffering tangible and intangible loss and damage so that they are best able to communicate meaningfully with decision makers and partners.

- Intangible loss and damage needs to be described, acknowledged and integrated into policy decisions on loss and damage which also take into account the uniqueness of different experiences.

- Finance to address loss and damage is urgently needed at scale and should go towards both tangible and intangible loss and damage, including provision for trauma and psychosocial healing, and cultural and social restitution and renewal.

- African countries must solidify their partnerships and continue to work together towards placing the stories of African communities and people most affected by loss and damage at the front and centre of international climate negotiations and discussions.

- There should be more investment in research to explore intangible loss and damage, how it persists over time and its cumulative impacts on people, their livelihoods, their coping and adaptive capacities and their well-being as a whole. Research should focus on enabling the people most affected to describe their experiences and identify their own solutions for funding from loss and damage finance.

LIVED EXPERIENCES

The research team spoke to women, men and young people living in Malawi and Zimbabwe who have been affected by extreme weather events such as cyclones and storms linked to climate change, in order to develop case studies illustrating their lived experiences of loss and damage.

Malawi case study

We spoke to members of three households living in Mbweza, Joliji and Chilindine villages in Chikwawa district in southern Malawi. They highlighted the following issues when asked about their experiences of loss and damage due to extreme weather events, including cyclones and tropical storms.

- They have experienced flooding, droughts and strong winds, but for them the most significant of these extreme events is flooding.
• At the community level, they have experienced tangible loss and damage to crop fields, livestock, roads, houses, graveyards and drinking water sources.

• At the household level, they described loss and damage to food, both in the field and in storage; to livestock; and to household items, including clothes and utensils.

• Most of the people in these villages have not recovered from their shock and trauma. The interviewees spoke about being very uncertain about the future and afraid that these events will be repeated.

‘My life is at risk right now. Everything that I had such as goats, chickens and guinea fowls was washed away by the floods, and I have nothing to rely on. In addition to that my life is at risk because we are approaching the rainy season and I am still yet to find my own accommodation. I also don’t see myself being able to build a new house anytime soon.’

– Joyce Luka.

‘The boy stayed for two weeks without going to school. He only started when the teacher promised to give him an exercise book and a pen. Later on, when we received money from well-wishers, I bought him clothes and we also bought some food. I have been encouraging him to go; it was difficult at the beginning, but eventually he they got to understand. The girl is affected more, because when it happened she was on her period, so she had difficulties taking care of herself. But we tried to help her.’

– Joyce Luka.

• The destruction of graveyards is a deeply disturbing loss. Villagers are unable to identify their relatives’ resting places and are unable to rebuild or repair tombstones.

‘Because people do not know which grave belongs to their relations, they end up preparing other people’s graves, for instance during tombstone unveiling. For example, I had a child whom we buried at the grave. I had plans to unveil the tombstone, but I failed because I can no longer identify the grave. I tried to go to the church to explain it, and my relatives said they would help me look into the matter and would bring feedback, but up to now I I haven’t heard anything.’

– Isaac Makina.
Zimbabwe case study

We spoke to members of three households living in Ndiadzo village, wards 9 and 10, in Chipinge district, Zimbabwe. They highlighted the following issues when asked about their experiences of loss and damage caused by the extreme weather event of Cyclone Idai, which struck in March 2019.

- Villagers experienced their fields, property and family members being washed away by the floods. They did not get the opportunity to pay their last respects or bury their loved ones. As a result, they still suffer psychosocial trauma, which they described as a void or an emptiness.

  ‘We lost several relatives, including my brother’s wife and child. My brother was saved by holding on to a rope. He is now in bad shape and no longer mentally stable. A local NGO collected him last week and took him to a rehabilitation centre in the city for counselling.’

  – Innocencia Njoringo.

- There was a reduction in crop yields after the cyclone, and interviewees felt that the rains may have brought acidic rains that affected soil fertility. The flooding deposited sand, stones and large boulders in their fields, which also affected soil fertility and the land’s suitability for growing crops.

- Any hint of cyclonic conditions now has a psychological impact on community members in Chipinge and the neighbouring district of Chizanimani. Weather conditions such as strong winds, thunder and thick cloud cover bring back mental pictures and memories of the destruction caused by Cyclone Idai, and the communities live in a perennial state of fear. Interviewees highlighted the need for counselling to help community members suffering from post-traumatic stress.

  ‘I was greatly affected by the loss of family and belongings and went into a depression that resulted in my blood pressure getting too high, which caused a stroke. My left side was affected and because of that I can no longer work for my family as I used to do before. I am now permanently disabled due to the impact of Cyclone Idai.’

  – Gift Zikuyumo.

- Children who were orphaned because of the floods also face a litany of problems, interviewees said. Chief among these is the constant question of what happened to their parents. Local cultures do not encourage speaking to children about death. These children continue to ask and have had to be told by their friends at school, which has led to further social and psychological challenges.

- The widespread damage caused by the cyclone to physical infrastructure included the destruction of schools, clinics, bridges, houses and shops.

This report has been developed through a participatory process involving civil society in southern Africa, climate activists, academics and policy makers. It draws on the lived experience of people affected by climate change in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. It aims to support the decolonization of ideas and language used to talk about loss and damage and climate justice, and to support localization.

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