

Climate-responsive social protection for an inclusive just transition in Malawi: Policy priorities emerging from the National Multi-Faith Dialogue

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Key messages

- *Climate change is driving poverty and vulnerability in Malawi*, requiring strong social protection systems and adaptation mechanism that anticipate and respond to climate shocks.
- *Malawi must transition from reactive to anticipatory and climate-responsive social protection* by integrating climate information, early warning systems, shock-sensitive targeting, and resilience-building interventions into social protection programmes
- *Faith actors are strategic but under-utilised partners in climate resilience*. Their extensive grassroots presence, trusted leadership, and longstanding engagement with communities position them to strengthen climate adaptation and social protection.
- *Sustainable & innovative financing is critical* to building resilient social protection systems, requiring greater domestic investment, increased access to climate finance, innovative financing mechanisms.
- *Stronger institutional coordination is essential* for stronger collaboration and integrated social protection actions across key sectors.
- *Inclusive, locally owned & led approaches that prioritise vulnerable groups and integrate indigenous knowledge with scientific evidence are essential* for building resilient and equitable climate action
- *Climate-responsive social protection is fundamental for achieving an inclusive and equitable just transition*, linking climate adaptation, sustainable livelihoods, renewable energy, and environmental stewardship to ensure no one is left behind.

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1. Introduction and policy context

Climate change poses a major threat to Malawi's sustainable development, undermining poverty reduction, food security, livelihoods, and human well-being. The country's reliance on rain-fed agriculture, upon which over 80% of the population depends for their livelihoods, coupled with widespread poverty, environmental degradation, and limited adaptive capacity, has increased vulnerability to recurrent floods, droughts, tropical storms, and cyclones (Bhatti et al., 2021). Recent shocks, including Cyclone Freddy (2023) and the 2024–2025 El Niño-induced drought,

exposed the limitations of existing social protection systems, highlighting the need to transition from reactive safety nets to adaptive, shock-responsive systems that strengthen long-term resilience. According to Poole & Plichta (2024), Cyclone Freddy had devastating impacts in Malawi, affecting approximately 2.27 million people, displacing more than 659,000 individuals, resulting in 679 fatalities and over 530 missing persons, while causing an estimated USD 507 million in economic losses.

Climate-responsive social protection provides a critical pathway for integrating climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, poverty reduction, and sustainable livelihoods. By using climate information, early warning systems, and vulnerability assessments, adaptive systems can anticipate shocks, protect productive assets, support recovery, and reduce reliance on humanitarian assistance. This approach is particularly important for protecting vulnerable groups, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, refugees, and poor rural households who face disproportionate impacts from climate change.

Malawi has made progress through frameworks such as the National Social Protection Policy (2024–2029), climate change management policies, disaster risk management policies, laws and strategies, and Malawi Vision 2063, which emphasise resilience, inclusive development, and sustainable livelihoods. However, implementation remains constrained by fragmented coordination, inadequate financing, weak integration between climate adaptation and social protection, and limited use of climate information in program design. The 2024 Malawi Economic Report highlights that the social protection system is heavily dependent on external funding, with over 95% of resources coming from international donors (World Bank, 2024) .

The transition towards a climate-resilient and low-carbon economy also requires deliberate measures to ensure that vulnerable populations are protected and enabled to participate in emerging opportunities. Climate-responsive social protection therefore serves as a foundation for an inclusive just transition, linking resilience-building with livelihood diversification, renewable energy access, climate-smart agriculture, and environmental stewardship. The World Bank Group's Country Climate and Development Report for Malawi projects that without significant adaptation, climate change could reduce GDP by 3-9% in 2030, 6-20% in 2040, and 8-16% by 2050 (World Bank Group., 2022).

Faith actors/communities represent an important but under-utilised partner in this agenda. With extensive grassroots networks, high levels of public trust, and long-standing experience in humanitarian support and community mobilisation, churches, mosques, and traditional faith institutions can strengthen early warning dissemination, community engagement, targeting of vulnerable households, and accountability in program delivery.

Recognising this opportunity, GreenFaith Africa convened the National Multi-Faith Dialogue on Strengthening Climate-Responsive Social Protection and Just Transition Pathways in Malawi in

July 2026. The dialogue brought together government, faith institutions, civil society, development partners, academia, traditional leaders, and climate-affected communities to identify policy actions to strengthen adaptive social protection and promote an equitable just transition. This policy brief synthesizes the key insights, challenges, and recommendations emerging from the dialogue to inform policy action and strengthen partnerships for building climate-resilient and socially inclusive systems in Malawi.

STRATEGIC PATHWAY FOR CHANGE



2. Key findings and observations from the National Multi-Faith Dialogue

The National Multi-Faith Dialogue revealed broad consensus among key stakeholders that Malawi's response to climate change requires a fundamental shift towards integrated, inclusive, and resilience-oriented social protection systems. Five overarching findings and observations emerged from the dialogue.

***Government + Faith Communities + Traditional Leaders + CSOs +
Development Partners + Communities***



Figure 1: Sani 1 community in the rural part of Salima District, a small fishing community of roughly 500 people (about 120 households) clinging to the edge of a lake that no longer respects its edges. Lake Malawi's water levels have been swelling toward historic highs this year, and as it rises, it does not simply flood a village. It repossesses it. Compounds that once held homes, gardens, and burial grounds are now submerged. Picture Credits: GreenFaith Africa 2026

Climate change has become Malawi's foremost social protection challenge

Participants agreed that climate change is no longer solely an environmental concern but a major driver of poverty, food insecurity, inequality, and livelihood vulnerability. Increasingly frequent droughts, floods, cyclones, and other climate-related shocks are placing unprecedented pressure on households, communities, and public institutions, while reversing hard-won development gains. There was strong consensus that climate-responsive social protection should be repositioned as a central pillar of Malawi's climate adaptation strategy rather than remaining primarily a post-disaster humanitarian response. Social protection must therefore evolve from providing temporary relief after crises to anticipating climate risks, protecting livelihoods before disasters occur, and strengthening household resilience over the long term.

Existing social protection systems must transition from reactive to anticipatory approaches

A recurring message throughout the dialogue was that current social protection programmes remain largely reactive, responding after households have already experienced significant losses. Participants highlighted the need to integrate climate forecasts, early warning systems,

vulnerability assessments, and anticipatory financing into program design and implementation. Adaptive social protection should combine social assistance with disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, and livelihood support to reduce future humanitarian needs and strengthen resilience before shocks occur. Participants further noted that program success should be measured not only by the number of beneficiaries reached but by the extent to which interventions reduce vulnerability, protect productive assets, and enable households to recover more quickly from climate-related shocks.

Faith communities are strategic but under-utilised partners in climate resilience

One of the strongest messages emerging from the dialogue was the recognition that faith communities constitute an under-utilised asset within Malawi's climate governance and social protection architecture. Religious institutions maintain extensive grassroots networks, enjoy high levels of public trust, and often provide humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, environmental stewardship, and community mobilisation long before external assistance reaches affected populations, with approximately 97% of Malawians identifying with a religion. Despite these comparative advantages, faith leaders and traditional authorities remain insufficiently involved in policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Participants therefore called for institutionalising the participation of faith-based organisations throughout the policy cycle, recognising them as strategic development partners capable of strengthening community engagement, improving policy uptake, and enhancing accountability.

Climate-responsive social protection requires stronger policy coherence and sustainable financing

Participants observed that Malawi has established an enabling policy environment through various climate change, disaster risk management, and social protection frameworks. However, implementation remains constrained by fragmented institutional coordination, weak decentralised implementation, limited integration across sectors, and heavy reliance on donor financing. The dialogue underscored the need to strengthen coordination among ministries responsible for climate change, social protection, disaster risk management, agriculture, energy, gender, and local government. Participants also emphasized that sustainable financing requires increased domestic resource mobilisation, improved access to international climate finance, innovative financing mechanisms, and stronger integration of social protection within national climate adaptation investments. Climate-responsive social protection should be viewed as a long-term investment in resilience rather than a recurrent humanitarian expenditure.

Inclusive, locally led approaches are essential for building resilient communities

The dialogue consistently reaffirmed that climate resilience cannot be achieved without placing vulnerable populations at the centre of policy design and implementation. Women, youth,

persons with disabilities, older persons, refugees, and poor rural households experience disproportionate climate impacts and therefore require targeted and inclusive social protection interventions. Participants further highlighted the importance of recognising indigenous knowledge, community experience, and locally led solutions alongside scientific evidence. Testimonies from climate-affected communities demonstrated that local actors possess valuable knowledge of coping strategies, environmental stewardship, and community solidarity that should inform national policy and program implementation. Strengthening district-level planning, empowering local institutions, and creating permanent platforms for collaboration among government, faith communities, civil society, and communities were identified as critical steps towards more effective and accountable climate-responsive social protection.

3. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Climate change is reshaping poverty and vulnerability in Malawi, requiring a shift from reactive humanitarian responses to anticipatory, climate-responsive social protection systems that strengthen resilience, protect livelihoods, and support inclusive development.

The National Multi-Faith Dialogue highlighted the importance of integrated action, sustainable financing, policy coherence, and locally led approaches involving government, faith communities, traditional leaders, civil society, and local governments. The following recommendations are proposed to accelerate Malawi's transition towards an adaptive, inclusive, and resilient social protection system. Implementing these actions will enhance the country's capacity to anticipate and manage climate risks while advancing the aspirations of Malawi Vision 2063, the National Social Protection Policy (2024–2029), and broader climate resilience and sustainable development priorities. By shifting from reactive crisis response to proactive resilience-building, these measures will promote equity, strengthen climate justice, protect vulnerable populations, and ensure that no one is left behind.

1. ***Institutionalise climate-responsive social protection within national development and climate policies.*** Climate-responsive social protection should be recognised as a strategic climate adaptation and resilience-building instrument rather than solely a poverty alleviation program. Government should strengthen policy coherence by integrating adaptive and shock-responsive social protection across climate change, disaster risk management, agriculture, energy, food security, and local development policies. This integration should be supported by stronger inter-ministerial coordination, harmonised planning and budgeting, and alignment of national and district development plans to ensure that climate risks are systematically addressed across sectors.

Priority actions

- Integrate adaptive social protection into national climate adaptation and development planning frameworks.
 - Strengthen coordination among ministries responsible for climate change, disaster risk management, social protection, agriculture, gender, energy, and local government.
 - Institutionalise anticipatory action by embedding climate risk information, early warning systems, and vulnerability assessments into social protection program design and implementation.
2. ***Strengthen the role of faith communities as strategic partners in climate resilience.*** Faith communities are among Malawi's most trusted institutions and possess extensive grassroots networks that reach vulnerable populations before, during, and after climate-related disasters. Their experience in humanitarian response, community mobilisation, environmental stewardship, and social support positions them as valuable partners in strengthening climate resilience. Government and development partners should move beyond ad hoc engagement and formally institutionalise faith-based organisations as partners throughout the policy cycle, from policy formulation and implementation to monitoring and evaluation.

Priority actions

- Establish a permanent multi-stakeholder platform involving government, faith institutions, civil society, academia, traditional leaders, and development partners to guide climate-responsive social protection.
 - Include faith-based organisations and traditional leaders in national and district climate change, disaster risk management, and social protection coordination structures.
 - Invest in capacity development for faith leaders on climate science, adaptive social protection, disaster preparedness, and climate finance to strengthen evidence-based advocacy and community engagement.
3. ***Shift from reactive humanitarian assistance to anticipatory and resilience-oriented social protection.*** Malawi's social protection system should progressively transition from responding to crises after they occur towards anticipating and reducing climate risks before they escalate. This requires integrating climate information, early warning systems, shock-sensitive targeting, and livelihood resilience measures into existing social protection programmes. Investments should focus on reducing vulnerability, protecting productive assets, and strengthening household capacity to withstand future shocks.

Priority actions

- Expand the use of climate forecasts and early warning information to trigger anticipatory social protection interventions.
 - Promote integrated programmes that combine social assistance with climate-smart agriculture, livelihood diversification, skills development, disaster risk reduction, and renewable energy access.
 - Measure program success using resilience indicators such as reductions in vulnerability, recovery time, and livelihood security rather than solely beneficiary numbers.
4. ***Mobilise Sustainable Financing for Climate-Responsive Social Protection.*** Building resilient communities requires predictable and sustainable financing. While international climate finance remains important, Malawi should increase domestic investment in adaptive social protection and diversify financing sources to reduce long-term dependence on external assistance. Climate-responsive social protection should be positioned as an investment that reduces future humanitarian costs while strengthening national resilience.

Priority actions

- Increase domestic budget allocations for adaptive social protection and resilience-building programmes.
 - Integrate social protection within national climate finance strategies to improve access to international adaptation funds.
 - Explore innovative financing mechanisms, including blended finance, disaster risk financing, private sector partnerships, and appropriate domestic revenue instruments.
 - Strengthen district-level capacity to access, manage, and account for climate and disaster risk financing.
5. ***Place vulnerable communities at the centre of climate action.*** Climate-responsive social protection will only be effective if it reflects the diverse needs and capacities of vulnerable populations. Women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, refugees, and poor rural households experience disproportionate climate impacts and should be prioritised throughout program design, implementation, and monitoring. Policies should also recognise the value of indigenous knowledge and community-led solutions in strengthening resilience.

Priority actions

- Ensure inclusive targeting and meaningful participation of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes.
- Strengthen community-based planning that combines scientific evidence with indigenous and local knowledge.
- Expand livelihood opportunities through climate-smart agriculture, green enterprises, renewable energy, and youth employment initiatives.
- Promote locally led adaptation approaches that strengthen community ownership and accountability

ACTION MATRIX

Priority Area	Proposed Action	Lead/Key Actors	Expected Result
Anticipatory Social Protection	Link early warning and climate forecasts to social protection triggers	Government, Environmental Affairs Department, Ministry of Gender, Department of Disaster Management Affairs, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Faith Leaders	Faster and earlier protection before shocks escalate
Faith Engagement	Develop faith-led climate and social protection capacity building	Faith Networks, Government, CSOs, Faith Leaders	Stronger faith-led climate advocacy
Community Resilience	Support community-led resilience and livelihood initiatives	Faith groups, CSOs, Local Councils, Communities	Stronger household resilience
Renewable Energy	Promote clean and affordable energy solutions	Government, Faith Groups, CSOs, Private Sector	Reduced energy vulnerability

Priority Area	Proposed Action	Lead/Key Actors	Expected Result
Financing	Expand domestic and international climate-responsive financing	Government, Development Partners, CSOs	More sustainable & innovative financing
Inclusion	Strengthen participation of women, youth, children and persons with disabilities	Ministry of Gender, CSOs, Faith Groups	More inclusive social protection
Policy Interface	Establish a structured government-faith-CSO-development partner platform	GreenFaith Africa and Partners	Improved coordination
Knowledge	Document community experiences and good practices	Multi-faith coalition, CSOs, Universities	Evidence-based policy and advocacy
Faith-Based Financing	Explore Church/Mosque Emergency Funds and similar mechanisms	Faith Institutions	Locally mobilised emergency and resilience resources

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