

ECRP Insights



Dodging the dry spell, p7



Pig business for Elvis, p9

Be prepared

ECRP communities get ready for the rainy season: pages 2-5



DISCOVER



Consolidating resilience



Five of ECRP-Christian Aid's seven target districts were heavily affected by floods from January onwards. Lives were lost and damage was caused to houses and crops.

This disaster has certainly had an impact on the work of the programme. But it has also demonstrated how ECRP has strengthened the resilience of communities, how village civil protection committees and early warning systems work in practice and, in the aftermath, how village savings and loans (VSL) groups enable people to take out small loans to buy essentials to get them on the road to recovery.

The floods have also provided an opportunity to see what we can improve and how we can work to minimise further the impact of future shocks on communities. We continue to learn from our experiences.

We would like to thank everyone involved in the relief and recovery effort after the floods. Cooperation and coordination are so important at this challenging time.

Sabine Joukes
ECRP-Christian Aid, Chief of Party

Rebuilding, recovering



Since the last issue of ECRP Insights, DISCOVER has been concentrating on rebuilding livelihoods following the floods and droughts which affected all five of our target districts.

More than 25,000 households have been reached with farm inputs: maize seed, sweet potato vines, beans and vegetable seeds. By September, households were harvesting these crops.

We have also been supporting the rehabilitation of 20 irrigation schemes damaged during the floods in Salima and Dedza. These schemes will benefit 1,902 households when they are finished.

A study we have conducted, assessing the contribution of resilience programmes to flood victims, showed DISCOVER households are able to quickly recover from disasters due to the integration of our interventions such as village savings and loans, and early-warning systems, among others.

Esther Mweso
DISCOVER Programme Manager

ECRP: Improving food security and strengthening resilience

Christian Aid and Concern Universal are each leading a consortium for the Enhancing Community Resilience Programme (ECRP) – a five-year initiative to improve food security, reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience. It has a reach of 600,000 people directly and up to 1.6 million altogether in 11 districts of Malawi prone to natural disasters and climatic hazards.

Running until 2016, the programmes, known respectively as ECRP-Christian Aid and DISCOVER (Developing Innovative Solutions with Communities to Overcome Vulnerability through Enhanced Resilience), work with local partners to deliver a range of interventions. These include early-warning systems and disaster risk management, village savings and loans (VSL) groups, conservation agriculture, small-scale irrigation, post-harvest management, agro-forestry, livestock, seed banks, and low-carbon technologies such as fuel-efficient cookstoves and solar lights.

ECRP has received funding, totalling more than £21m

over five years, from UK aid from the UK Government, Irish Aid, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The goal of the programmes is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and increase the resilience of vulnerable communities. This will enable households to build livelihoods that are sustainable and profitable, incorporating natural resource management and risk reduction, increasing adaptive capacity and enabling people to have a voice in decisions affecting them.



The Sankhwi Irrigation Scheme, Machinga district, is one of 41 irrigation schemes run by ECRP-Christian Aid.

Working together to tackle food insecurity

Dry spells have compounded the effects of the January floods on the overall harvest of Malawi – it is estimated the total harvest for 2015 will be 30% lower than last year.



Samuel Kharika, Chairman of Mwaiwathu Irrigation Scheme at Mkumbira Village, TA Chikweo, Machinga district, works in his vegetable garden.

The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) has identified

2.8 million people in need of food support. Aid, in the form of food or cash transfers, will be provided in coordination with the World Food Programme (WFP).

The government has called on development partners to coordinate their efforts to address food shortages as there are insufficient funds to do so. WFP is also calling for organisations providing cash and food support to link up with long-term resilience programmes like ECRP.

ECRP is working in its target areas to address food insecurity. It has distributed seeds and vines for planting and plans to expand this effort. This is supported by an additional focus on irrigation and includes the delivery of treadle pumps and watering cans to support farmers to irrigate land and secure crop growth – both for cash crops and food.

The irrigation schemes will enable families to grow food and cash crops this season and in the future, bringing them back on the road towards resilience.



ECRP is providing treadle pumps and watering cans to support farmers to irrigate land and secure crop growth for cash crops and food. ECRP farmer Mina Dyson uses a treadle pump to water her vegetable garden in Mkumbira Village, TA Chikweo, Machinga district.

Local knowledge key to early warnings

Local, traditional and indigenous knowledge is critical in effective, people-centred early-warning systems to protect Malawi's most vulnerable communities.

The International Day for Disaster Reduction, held on October 13, focused on this as its main theme.

'Early warning signs and signals have been passed on from forefathers – it has been a human desire for millennia to make accurate weather predictions,' said Amos Mwamlima, Chair of Mwachunguti village civil protection committee (VCPC), in GVH Njalayankhunda, Karonga district.

'For example, when black flying ants come out during the early rains it is a sign of heavy rains.' Karonga is particularly prone to floods, primarily between January to April.

There are many locally known trends that can indicate changes in the environment, many of which have proved to be reliable over many years. The behaviour of ants, chameleons, livestock and other

animals can provide vital information that might be missed by more advanced technology.

Since the Malawi Government's approval of the national Disaster Risk Management Policy and strategic plans, DISCOVER has been working with Karonga district council to orient local civil protection committees (CPCs) on the document. The programme has previously worked in Karonga to develop early-warning systems, and supports the district council to work alongside NGOs and communities to increase the resilience of the most vulnerable communities.

Mr Mwamlima said the new policy had given VCPCs a mandate to incorporate local and traditional knowledge into early-warning systems. Priority three of the document discusses the development of the people-centred early-warning systems.

With a people-centred early-warning system, the role of CPCs, who know the importance of predicting potential disasters earlier and more accurately,

will become more central in mitigating the impact of disasters than before.

In effect, communities themselves have taken on the responsibility of warning vulnerable lowland areas of impending disasters, despite the added costs of mobile phones and the commitment of time to regularly read river line gauges.

Now encouraged to combine technology with their local knowledge, CPCs are perceived as the protectors of lowland communities.

'We send local and scientific early-warning signals and messages to the downstream communities through different equipment and channels that DISCOVER and other NGOs have provided,' Amos said.

Effective early-warning systems are widely accepted as a key component in managing disaster risks. The Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-15) and the Sendai Framework for Action (2015-30) both prioritised early-warning systems.

Ready for the rains?



Daudi John, Chair of Kachedwa Natural Resources Club, visits the woodlot at M'bisa village, Machinga district. ECRP communities have planted more than 270,000 trees, including many along river banks, to mitigate the effects of climate change due to deforestation.

Are ECRP communities ready if another deluge strikes? Environmental journalist Charles Mkoka visited Machinga and Chikwawa to find out.

'We have developed a map for our area in which we have indicated key important challenges. We have also pointed out what is prone to disaster and marked it with a red star. We find out the causes of these disasters and how we can mitigate them,' said Jack Issa of Kampani village civil protection committee (VCPC), under GVH Mkumbira, Traditional Authority (TA) Chikweo.

He added: 'We have been planting trees along river banks and moving people from flood-prone areas.' He explained that the VCPC will work with the school committee, local churches and community-based organisations to reach as many residents as possible when floods are imminent, and that people with disabilities affected by disasters would be accounted for.

Kampani VCPC is supported by Emmanuel International, an ECRP-Christian Aid partner. When disasters strike, VCPCs assess how many people have been affected, the loss of livestock and damage to property and crops. This information is sent to Area Civil Protection Committees (ACPCs) and then the district disaster office who then

determine how many households might face food insecurity, better plan future humanitarian assistance and provide advice on which crops to grow.

'We have developed a map. We have indicated key important challenges and pointed out what is prone to disaster and marked it with a red star. We find out the causes of these disasters and how we can mitigate them.'

George Mkwaila, who chairs Chikweo ACPC, explained how community members have also been trained in first response to rescue people when disasters strike.

In Chikwawa, VCPC member Alex Mchacha said budgeted contingency plans were being developed at village level. These plans ensure the committee has enough flour to provide porridge for those affected by floods while they wait for other assistance. The committee also checks houses and other structures to make sure they can withstand shocks and will not be dangerous during strong winds and heavy rains.

Early-warning systems are also a key pillar of ECRP, providing timely and relevant information that allows those in danger to take action to avoid or reduce the risk of harm or losses and prepare for an effective response.

Meteorologist Josta Mahalu explained that under ECRP, four centres had been set up with rain gauges to observe rainfall trends. Information from these centres about the residual moisture present in the soil helps farmers to plan the planting of their crops and which varieties to acquire – for example, maize, tobacco or groundnuts – and predict the amount of water that can be expected in their irrigation schemes.

ECRP communities receive this information through Esoko, an African agricultural information and communication service which provides market information, weather forecasts and growing tips.

‘Text messages sent through Esoko to small-scale farmers helps in reporting localised weather information,’ said Chakhumata Yokoniya, Chair of the VCPC in GVH Khungubwe, TA Ngowe, supported by ECRP-Christian Aid partner the Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM).

‘Once we get these messages from weather experts we mobilise the farmers using a public address system to alert them of impending weather. The information also arms those doing conservation agriculture. It is crucial in decision-making on what type of seed and varieties should be planted as part of resilience building and food security.’

In Chikwawa, a district more prone to flooding because the terrain is flat, people have pinpointed the Lalanje River – which marks the boundary between Chikwawa and Nsanje – as a major threat during times of disasters. Local VCPCs – whose capacity has been built through ECRP – worked together to create a sandbag barrier to prevent floodwaters from reaching their villages.



Chakhumata Yokoniya, Chair of the VCPC at GVH Khungulubwe, TA Ngowe, Chikwawa district, practises speaking to the community with a loudhailer. ECRP has trained VCPCs to respond when disasters strike.

Ministry's forecast for rainy season

The Malawian Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services has been releasing forecasts for the coming rainy season almost every day through newspapers, radio and other platforms.

The forecasts suggest Malawi will experience normal rainfall, but lower-than-average amounts are expected in some areas, particularly in the Shire Valley, towards the end of the season.

ECRP is working with communities to mitigate the expected impacts from El Niño in this season.

This is the time for communities to be well-informed as they make key decisions on their farms, and the time to share weather information with neighbours and friends.



Margaret and her son Shalif outside their thatched home in Vethiwa village, GVH Chipolonga, Machinga. Part of their home was destroyed by torrential rains in January. Through VSL, Margaret is hoping to buy iron sheets to reroof it.

Flood victims move to new home

Chiefs in one part of Nsanje district have agreed to give away land so a neighbouring community, perennially at risk from floods, can have a permanent new home.

People from Kadyamba, TA Mlolo, in north Nsanje, used to return to their villages to rebuild following devastating floods, which often saw lives lost and property destroyed.

But this time they will be staying in the Kampira area of TA Mbenje, after community leaders there set aside land to enable them to relocate from their disaster-prone home for good.

‘Thanks to the kind gesture the Mbenje communities have showed to us, we are no longer going back to that evil land. We have lost quite a lot

of relations and livelihoods,’ said one Kadyamba community leader, wiping away tears.

Communities in Kadyamba experienced the worst flooding in living memory in 2015. Many people were trapped by raging waters from the Shire River, which submerged entire homes within hours.

Twelve villagers were killed, while others ran and paddled for their lives in canoes to dry land in Mbenje. More than 270 families fled and were camped temporarily at Magoti Primary School awaiting assistance. DISCOVER partner GOAL Malawi was among the first organisations to respond, putting up two marquees to accommodate displaced people who had been packed into classrooms.

Twelve villagers were killed, while others ran and paddled for their lives in canoes to dry land in Mbenje.

‘Our friends were hit the hardest by the flooding and their place is no longer habitable,’ said Chrispin Mzunguza, the Area Civil Protection Committee Secretary for Mbenje. ‘That’s why all the chiefs have agreed to assist the people from Kadyamba to finally move from their flood prone area to Mbenje, which is like a safe haven.’



DISCOVER partner GOAL Malawi was among the first organisations to respond to the plight of the Kadyamba people, putting up two marquees in Mbenje to accommodate displaced people who had been packed into classrooms.

Dodging the dry spell

Up to 40% of DISCOVER households in Karonga district did not harvest enough food to last them throughout the year because erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells affected their 2014/15 growing season.

The poor harvest also caused the price of maize to rocket at local markets – reaching MK91.94/kg, compared to MK86.49/kg during the same period last year.

As a result, many families have been struggling to access enough food, even before the start of the traditional lean period.

But for farmer David Matandala, the situation has been more encouraging despite having 20 mouths to feed under one roof, mostly his grandchildren.

With such a large family, David has always had to work hard to provide enough food. But as a lead farmer under the DISCOVER programme, being implemented by its partner Self Help Africa (SHA), in Group Village Headman (GVH) Mwaungulu,

TA Wasambo, he has gained new knowledge and received the support he needs to do so.

David started practising conservation agriculture to combat the effects of climate change on his crops. His three-quarter acre maize field survived the recent dry spells enabling him to harvest about 350kg of maize.

‘I could have harvested more if rains were normal,’ David said. ‘Nevertheless, my field has produced the highest yield due to the sustainable practice of conservation agriculture as compared to other conventional fields.’

‘Conservation agriculture is a sustainable practice. It is not labour intensive, improves fertility and crops survive during the dry spell,’ he added, with a nod to the DISCOVER programme. ‘I will take advantage of my position as a local leader to promote the sustainable practice so that households become resilient and food secure.’



David Matandala of Mwaungulu GVH, TA Wasambo, Karonga, has harvested 350kgs of maize from his three-quarter acre field this year.

A ‘champion’ of tree planting

By Joel Gift Ngwira

Malawi is highly deforested due to human activities such as poor farming, charcoal burning, and the gathering



Fredrick Chapendeka has planted 2,000 trees in the woodlot in Mphunga.

and selling of firewood – the loss of trees plays a part in climate change which impacts many communities.

DISCOVER partner Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI) is promoting afforestation – the planting of trees – in Salima district as part of the programme’s work to address climate change and build resilience.

Fredrick Chapendeka, a 58-year-old farmer from Mphunga Village, GVH Mphunga, TA Ndindi, is one of the community members involved in this activity. Fredrick has been part of the village natural resource committee in Mphunga since 2013. The group has 36 members – 25 women and 11 men.

‘At first I ignored the importance of planting trees, until my village was forced to relocate because of floods

that we experienced in 2012,’ Fredrick said.

‘Now I am a champion in the promotion of tree planting, for I understand their importance both in the short- and long-run thanks to the DISCOVER programme.’

Fredrick has raised 2,000 trees in just two growing seasons so far and plans to plant at least 2,000 more in each growing season from now on. He encourages other members of the village natural resource committee to plant 700 trees each season too.

Fredrick has also been urging various stakeholders to give more attention and focus to afforestation as part of ensuring a more sustainable future and a better tomorrow for Malawi.

More in store for granaries



Grace Phiri has built her own mud-smeared granary in Kapyanga.

Compared to VSL, conservation agriculture and disaster risk reduction projects, the uptake in the post-harvest management intervention of ECRP-Christian Aid had been slow in GVH Kapyanga after the programme reached the community in 2013.

Initially, only six people were involved in the construction of mud-smeared granaries for their harvested crops and only two managed to actually store grain in them.

But the situation changed when ECRP partner Catholic Development

Commission in Malawi (CADECOM) organised a learning visit to Salima district where CARE Malawi had been implementing PHASE – a mud granary project, which was working well. Farmer exchange visits have proved vital in exposing farmers to new technologies within ECRP.

Grace Phiri, from Simalambo village, GVH Kapyanga, took part in the visit, seeing how the granaries were constructed and learning from the hosts how maize grain stored inside can stay in good condition for long periods.

When she returned to Simalambo, Grace built her own granary. 'I just thought of giving it a try to prove what the Salima people were saying,' she said.

Six months after Grace had stored her maize grain in the granary, she invited her community to visit. The maize was as good as it was when it was stored, convincing people that mud-smeared granaries can keep grain safe for longer and at a lower cost than sacks in the house.

The following year, 32 households in Kapyanga constructed and stored maize in mud-smeared granaries and are starting to reap the benefits.

'Proper handling of farm produce is indeed a good tool of economic empowerment in our communities,' added Grace.



Grace Phiri's mud-smeared granary keeps grain safe for longer and at a lower cost than sacks in the house.

Ministers visit consortia stands



Bright Msaka, Malawi's Minister of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining, bought 20 fuel-efficient cookstoves at the World Environment Day celebrations in June.

ECRP was one of the best in show at the 12th National Agricultural Fair that was held in August in Blantyre.

Natural products such as chidede (a hibiscus-like plant), honey and dried cassava were on display and on sale, while visitors could also find out more about low-carbon technologies such as energy-efficient cookstoves and solar products, and take away publications about the programme.

The Minister for Agriculture, Dr Allan Chiyembekeza, visited the stand and saw how the programme is supporting the economic empowerment of farmers.

Meanwhile, Bright Msaka, Malawi's Minister of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining bought 20 fuel-efficient cookstoves produced in DISCOVER communities at the World Environment Day celebrations held in Balaka in June.

The minister gave the stoves away to children and other guests at the event but took five home for his own use and for neighbours. The stoves use less firewood than traditional stoves, cook faster and emit less smoke.

DISCOVER is pig business for Elvis

Elvis Munthali recently celebrated the third litter of piglets born since he became part of the Takwondwa piggery group, a project supported by DISCOVER partner Self Help Africa (SHA).



Due to his success with the piggery project, Elvis Munthali has also been trusted by his community to be a livestock lead farmer.

Elvis, from Donald village, GVH Mwandanga, Karonga, joined the project three years ago, receiving two sows and a boar. He and other members also received cement to help construct buildings for the animals and training in running a piggery.

Within just over a year, the two sows had 42 piglets between them. Elvis raised the piglets to four-month weaners. He gave 10 to neighbours as part of the Pass It On initiative, where initial recipients share the benefits with other community members, and sold the others.

The pigs gave birth for the third time in June this year to 20 piglets. Elvis sold 15 and gave away two to a friend. The remaining three – two sows and a boar – and has kept as breeding stock, allowing him to sell on his original pigs.

So far, Elvis, a married father of six, has earned K862,000 (US\$1,552) from the project. With the money, Elvis has paid for his children's school fees, bought building materials for maintenance of the piggery, a new bicycle, and maize to sustain his family during leaner times.

Elvis is also a member of his local village savings and loans group, and practises conservation agriculture and forestry as part of the DISCOVER programme. He rears guinea fowls and chickens for eggs and meat for income and food, and uses chicken and pig manure on his field crops.

'[Previously] I tried to keep my head above water but failed when I grew tomatoes and maize which was washed away by floods and dried up by dry spells, leaving my family and me helpless,' Elvis said.

'I had no means of uplifting myself. Today, through pig farming and other interventions, food is no longer a problem in my household.'

Due to his success with the piggery project, Elvis has also been trusted by his community to be a livestock lead farmer. He has been trained and provided with start-up veterinary drugs, equipment and kits.

'In this area livestock diseases were rampant and it was difficult to access livestock services due to the limited number of government livestock staff,' he added. 'The mortality rate was high but now we have managed to reduce it to almost zero.'

There are still challenges in growing his business, including a scarcity of pig feed and unreliable markets for selling pigs. But Elvis plans to expand by extending the piggery units, breeding more chickens, goats and guinea fowl.

'I believe this programme will take me somewhere to ensure food security and resilience in my household,' he said. 'I urge my fellow beneficiaries to be hardworking and benefit from these intervention packages. The project will go, but the benefits shall remain with us in our communities.'



Elvis with one of the pigs in his piggery unit.

More opportunities for vulnerable communities – you can bank on it!

By Charles Mkoka, Daily Times environmental journalist



Felia Keston, a member of the Chitsanzo VSL group in Jacob village, TA Kasisi, Chikwawa district, stands by her new home in October 2015. She has built the house with a VSL loan and has already bought iron sheets for roofing the building.

In the beginning, Bertha Maloya was able to buy better varieties of rice seeds, which boosted her harvest. She sold that extra rice to buy iron sheets to help protect her home. Then she bought cement to further improve her house. Bertha's most recent purchase was a bicycle.

This has all happened since 2012, when Bertha decided to join her local village savings and loan group (VSL) in Group Village Headman Vethiwa, Machinga district.

VSL groups, where villagers start their own small bank, offering a saving and lending service to members with interest, has helped mitigate the impact of tough times brought about by floods and other disasters. But people can also use the money to improve their homes, buy essentials and invest in business ideas.

For many people in Malawi, it is difficult to open an account with a commercial bank. And base lending rates are high for borrowers such as farmers. This has long been a challenge to many who wanted to start or invest in small

businesses but lacked the necessary capital.

With interest rates between 15% and 20%, VSL enables financial empowerment and liberation for poorer people. Women in particular have embraced the groups.

Through ECRP-Christian Aid, more than 50,000 households now participate in VSL groups across seven districts, including Machinga and Chikwawa.

Without VSL, Bertha said it would have been impossible to make progress as she has.

In Jacob village, Group Village Headman Fombe, Chikwawa district, the Chitsanzo VSL group has received support from ECRP partner Eagles Relief to build the capacity of members in financial procedures and management. Members have been able to buy iron sheets, bicycles and livestock.

'This has strengthened us in the face of climate change,' said Zefa George, a single mother of five who chairs the

Chitsanzo group. 'More new participants have now joined us after seeing the benefits from the group.'

'ECRP has broadened our understanding and knowledge of climate change resilience. We were trained in various interventions such as conservation agriculture, livestock rearing and seed systems.'

Chitsanzo member Doris Kamoto explained how VSL returns helped her start a bicycle taxi business. The money she earns from hiring out the bike to fellow villagers and people with small businesses has enabled her to invest in improved drought-tolerant seeds that grow better in the climatic conditions.

'VSL provides this financial support base in a rural setting,' Doris said. 'To buy improved seed you need money. VSL is the foundation for all these initiatives.'

'Initially, when ECRP brought the VSL idea I was hesitant. After seeing the benefits, I changed my mind and joined.'

Doris added that ECRP encourages farmers to grow different crops, such as cow peas, pigeon peas, soya beans, millet and sorghum which improves diet diversity, nutrition and food security. If one crop fails another may do better, and can be sold to buy food for the family in leaner times.

Joyce Amos, of Group Village Headman Khungubwe, Chikwawa district, has been a VSL member since 2011. She initially invested in a small business and bought a cow.



Zefa George, centre, Chair of the Chitsanzo VSL group in Jacob village, TA Kasisi, Chikwawa district, speaks during their meeting.



Chitsanzo member Chrissie Mateyu gives water to her five cows, which she bought with the money she saved through her village VSL group.

Eneless Madi, from Vethiwa VSL, said savings and loans were used during times of disaster, after the loss of livestock. It also helps to pay school fees and hospital bills. 'This is the reason we have maintained the group – it provides the needed support.'

Fellow member Loness Mussa added: 'Initially, when ECRP brought the VSL idea I was hesitant. After seeing the benefits the members were able to gain, I changed my mind and joined. So far, I have managed to mould bricks and burnt them to construct a house after receiving my earnings. Later, I bought goats and the droppings are used as manure in my conservation agriculture initiatives.'

It is onwards and upwards for the VSL groups supported by ECRP. Members realise that for the idea to continue to grow and develop they must save larger amounts. This, in turn, will allow those wanting to embark on bigger business ventures to borrow higher amounts from the VSL too.

Greater investment should result in higher returns, so even when loans have been repaid, members will have more in their pockets to improve their lives and livelihoods. Ultimately, this will help ensure food security and mitigate the crises – such as droughts and floods – that many communities and families face in these vulnerable districts of Malawi.

Research shows ECRP communities are more resilient



Heavy rainfall in January caused massive flooding in southern Malawi, affecting many ECRP-Christian Aid and DISCOVER districts.

In the wake of the 2015 floods, ECRP commissioned research to find out if their target communities are more resilient to disasters than those not reached by the programmes.

ECRP households have better coping mechanisms and know where to go for help.

The findings showed ECRP communities were better prepared and had greater access to early-warning information. They took more action based on these warnings, compared to non-ECRP families. However, not everyone took action, researchers discovered, and ECRP can do even more to raise awareness.

Researchers found ECRP households had better coping mechanisms – particularly VSL and livestock – and knew where to go for help. But a lack of availability of emergency aid items such as tents and blankets, and lack of finances for the immediate response, were a challenge.

Going into its 5th year of implementation, ECRP takes these learnings into account to address the issues and strengthen the programme to build resilience.



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