

Policy Brief

Bridging disaster risk and internal displacement in Malawi: reflections on Malawi's Disaster Risk Management Policy

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Summary

This article is a short discussion of the Malawi Disaster Risk Management Policy, a document that is indirectly linked to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in that country. The paper focuses on how the Policy can be advantageous for internally displaced persons, despite the fact that it does not have terminology such as 'internal displacement' or 'internally displaced persons'. The paper ends by making three recommendations on policy and legislation regarding IDPs in Malawi.

1 Introduction

In Malawi, internal displacement is mainly caused by natural disasters such as flash floods over hilly areas, tropical storms and rivers breaking their banks. The biggest natural disasters on record to have struck Malawi include Cyclone Idai in 2019. The storm left 60 people dead, directly affecting 868, 900 people, and 86, 000 of the victims were left

in IDP camps. Flooding in 2015, killed 280 people and 230, 000 people were displaced from their homes in half of Malawi's 28 districts (The Guardian, 2015). Lastly in 1991, flash floods killed between 700 and 1000 persons in the southern district of Phalombe (Daily Times 2016).

Other forms of natural disasters include drought which causes hunger as Malawi is heavily reliant on rain-fed agriculture. The staple food is maize, and so failure in rainfall means calamity mainly in rural areas where there is a lot of subsistence farming. Affected people sometimes end up moving to urban areas in search of jobs as an alternative for their livelihood.

2 The Disaster Risk Management Policy

The Disaster Risk Management Policy was adopted in 2015 to improve on a previous document, and as part of efforts to replace the 1991 Disaster Preparedness Relief Act which was passed in parliament without a policy (Government of Malawi 2015). The new Disaster Risk Management Act is yet to be enacted. The Disaster Risk Management Policy is benchmarked on international instruments including the SADC Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy, the Africa Regional Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy, the Hyogo Framework for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change. The Policy has no connections to the Kampala Convention.

The Disaster Risk Management Policy focuses on sustainable development in Malawi. The document states that its establishment 'is a major step towards achieving sustainable development through ensuring that disaster risk management is integrated in development planning by all sectors in the country. The Policy will also facilitate the effective coordination of disaster risk management programmes in the country' (Government of Malawi 2015). Hence it seems that sustainable development is first and disaster risk management second. The third highlight is that the Policy aims at making Malawi a disaster resilient country.

Being an instrument that is development-oriented, the Disaster Risk Management Policy is linked to local policies that touch on health, food security, water, forestry, mining and education among others. Furthermore, the Policy is connected to local legislation on water, town planning and forestry. The 1995 Malawi Constitution is also referred to in

some parts of the Disaster Risk Management Policy. There are no linkages to human rights related policies or laws to indicate a rights-based approach.

While the Policy does not specifically recognise IDPs, it mentions recovery of people affected by disaster which is rather a general term and does not zero in on IDPs. Nonetheless, it presents an opportunity for protecting IDPs in the context of disasters. The next section considers this point.

3 Protecting IDPs through the Disaster Risk Management Policy

The Disaster Risk Management Policy has the opportunity to promote the welfare of IDPs. Although the document does not specifically mention them as beneficiaries, its focus on sustainable development could be used to advance the welfare of IDPs. For instance, Sustainable Development Goal 11 talks of resilient human settlements that are safe, inclusive and resilient; and Goal 13 calls for urgent action in fighting climate change. The two goals could benefit IDPs in Malawi bearing in mind that internal displacement is linked to natural disasters such as floods. If settlements are sturdy as well as safe, and if there is effort in mitigating climate change then there would be less IDPs. The other Goals of the SDGs could serve IDPs well too such as ending poverty and reducing inequality.

Furthermore, the Policy is connected to local policies and legislation on development-related aspects such as water provision, town planning, food security, forestry and education (Government of Malawi 2015). Hence, there is opportunity for provision of safe and potable water to IDPs, restrictions to building settlements in disaster prone areas, better management of forest reserves that discourages environmental degradation as well as ensuring quality education. IDPs too could be assured of provision of food items as a result of the Malawi Disaster Risk Management Policy being connected to the local documents.

Another positive aspect in the Malawi Disaster Risk Management Policy is that it sets out effective coordination of all programmes concerning disaster risk management (Government of Malawi 2015). Such coordination could mean better delivery of services to IDPs, without duplicating efforts and wasting resources. Additionally, the Policy broadly focuses on building resilience of the nation, minimising losses, recovery of communities from disasters and mainstreaming disaster risk response activities in budgets at various levels. The benefit to IDPs is that it provides a framework for ensuring that there is likelihood of minimal loss of life and property, and better chances of recovery

in the aftermath of natural calamities. There is hope therefore of IDPs going back to relative normalcy following floods, cyclones or drought from the camps they could have found shelter. Provision of funding at national and local levels is also beneficial as IDPs may have the resources for life in camps and for recovery efforts after they return to their original homes.

The Disaster Risk Management Policy has been implemented quite well as evidenced by prompt government response in dealing with disasters such as the aftermath of the 2019 Cyclone Idai. The authorities were at the centre of coordinating relief, rehabilitation and recovery efforts for thousands of IDPs following the tropical storm, in league with development partners.

Although the DRMP provides a significant opportunity to protect IDPs, it is important for Malawi to domesticate the Kampala Convention which it ratified in 2013. From interviews I conducted with government officials on the domestication of the Kampala Convention, there was a general impression that Malawi signs and ratifies conventions, but struggles to make such international instruments part of domestic legislation or policies. Domesticating the Kampala Convention is important in order to provide holistic protection.

4 Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that the DRMP has served IDPs fairly well looking at how Malawi government has responded to recurrent disasters. But it could be more efficient if the Policy was more aligned to the Kampala Convention. This brief recommends the following for Malawi:

- A scheduled review of the Malawi Disaster Risk Management Policy to provide direct reference to IDPs in the context of disasters.
- Malawi should enact the Disaster Risk Management Act.
- Malawi should create clearly and effectively domesticate the Kampala Convention.

References

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