CLIMATE JUSTICE

Loss and Damage Action Research: Case Studies of Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe

Consultant team: Sandra Bhatasara, Lesley Macheka, Rosta Mate, Loveness Msopi and Admire Nyamwanza

Oxfam team: Helen Jeans, Juliet Suliwa Kasito, Fred Perraut, Leonard Unganai and Lyndsay Walsh

Oxfam Research Reports are written to share research results, to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. They do not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of Oxfam.

www.oxfam.org
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was undertaken to support and empower Southern African leaders, activists, civil society organizations (CSOs) and policymakers, in the lead up to COP 27 and beyond, in the debate on the losses and damages caused by climate impacts. The definition of ‘loss and damage’ by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) looks at ‘the actual and/or potential manifestation of impacts associated with climate change in lower income countries that negatively affect human and natural systems’, including impacts from extreme events (e.g. heatwaves, flooding and drought) and slow-onset events (including sea-level rise and glacial retreat).1

The study used an ‘action research’ approach by supporting the collective and inclusive documentation and sense-making of the lived experiences of loss and damage, and the co-production of a loss and damage narrative, through case studies and participatory workshops with Southern African survivors, communities, activists, civil society and decision-makers. Reflective collaboration supported the decolonization of the language and concepts used to talk about loss and damage and climate justice. This report describes this process and its outcomes. We hope it can support the influencing work of Southern African leaders and contribute to the development of loss and damage policy and practice that reflects and responds to the lived experiences of people whose lives are turned upside down by the climate crisis.

The research highlights the importance of non-economic losses such as trauma, mental distress,2 physical health issues and the loss of a sense of belonging. These are often neglected by mainstream narratives, which tend to focus on economic losses.

**Box 1: Six dimensions of ‘loss and damage’**

We are proposing that six dimensions of loss and damage from climate impacts emerged in this action research: psychological, cultural, social, economic, ecological and biophysical. Psychological distress – includes trauma and mental distress – is experienced due to the death or injury of family or community members, often in chaotic and frightening circumstances. Cultural identity can be disrupted due to loss and damage to cultural heritage. Social connections are broken due to the deaths of family and community members, displacement, and loss and damage to social structures such as schools. Economic loss is experienced as a result of loss and damage to belongings, homes, livestock, gardens, etc. Ecological loss is experienced when for example, topsoil is washed away or wells become polluted; and biophysical loss describes loss and damage to biodiversity, including the geographic distribution of species. Loss and damage comprise economic aspects, such as damage to property, belongings and livelihoods, as well as non-economic aspects, such as psychological distress, cultural and social disruption, and dislocation. The experience of non-economic loss and damage differs between individuals and groups: women, children, and men, and different societies and cultures will have unique experiences of this kind of loss and damage.
In addition to the destruction of economic assets such as property, food and belongings, the research brings into painful focus how interviewees impacted by climate change experience loss of dignity and respect, loss of peace of mind, and trauma and mental distress resulting from the death of community or family members. Deaths often occur in distressing and chaotic circumstances, and the bodies of loved ones washed away in floods may never be recovered and given a dignified burial. Following loss and damage, survivors live with anxiety, fear and a sense of dread that the events might reoccur. They report feeling insecure and afraid of the environment that used to sustain them. Interviewees also mentioned loss of heritage through the destruction of landscapes and important cultural sites such as graveyards, the disruption of social services, and the continuing personal and social impact of illness and deaths. This research shows that loss and damage is not a one-off event but persists over time and has cumulative impacts, as one loss often leads to several other losses.

These experiences of human suffering cannot be captured using universal or borrowed language. There is an urgent need to find culturally relevant ways to talk about and communicate the context and culturally specific trauma and mental distress people suffer because of climate change impacts. This would support survivors and decision-makers to develop and implement loss and damage policy and practice that reflects and responds to people’s unique lived experiences.

In summary, the research findings show that loss and damage resulting from climate change entails destruction, disruption, trauma, mental distress and dislocation. These effects are exacerbated by the inadequacy of the conversation around the impacts of and responsibility for climate change, the lack of participation in the development of policy and practice by survivors, and the absence of comprehensive compensation that reflects the ways in which people’s lives have been turned upside down by climate impacts.

Based on findings from both the action research and case study components of this project, we conclude that:

1. Not all climate impacts are quantifiable or even comparable across cultures. Loss and damage can include loss of cultural symbols, places people identify with or even ways of life. People’s experience of loss is shaped by their values, cultural and socio-economic contexts, and daily practices. Knowledge of loss therefore needs to account for the inherently subjective and varying nature of values, contexts and experiences, and how this shapes the way people experience and bear losses.

2. Decolonization of the language and evidence base used to talk about loss and damage and climate justice more generally is essential, so that Southern African communities, leaders, CSOs, activists, negotiators and academics are equipped with an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of communities who are suffering loss and damage, and are able to communicate this and advocate for better climate policies.

3. A common and unified position and narrative on loss and damage may be desirable if Southern African leadership is to be heard and influential in shaping loss and damage policy and practice. This needs to be co-created in a bottom-up way, so that responses on how to address loss and damage can be tailored to the specific location and lived experiences of impacted communities.
4. Any narrative on loss and damage should be: inclusive, with perspectives from a wide range of different stakeholders; holistic, to capture the different types of loss and damage – psychological, cultural, social, economic, ecological and biophysical; focused, in that it clearly differentiates between economic and non-economic losses; and nuanced enough to capture people’s lived experiences, indigenous expressions of losses, and issues of note from different contexts, given the diversity of communities in Southern Africa.

5. More resources, including climate finance, are needed to help people recover and rebuild following climate impacts and to cope with the different dimensions of loss and damage. Governments in the Global North, who are disproportionately responsible for emissions and pollution, should be providing the majority of finance. At the same time, African governments should be accountable to their citizens and responsive to loss and damage suffered by communities.
NOTES


2 This study refers to trauma and mental distress/suffering. It does not further interpret the lived experiences of survivors of extreme weather events by imposing terms such as anxiety or depression. These terms are contested in the Global North in discourses about mental health and human wellbeing. The study takes the view that appropriate terms need to emerge from affected communities and survivors.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The insights, case studies and recommendations contained in this 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. We are indebted to the people of Mbweza, Joliji and Chilindiine villages in Chikwawa, Malawi, Ndiadzo village, Wards 9 and 10 in Chipinge, Zimbabwe, and Panjane community in Magude, Mozambique, for sharing their stories and experiences. We would also like to thank everyone who participated in the online workshops.

Readers or users of this report may copy, distribute and transmit the work and create derivative works. However, photos used in this report may not be used without prior permission of Oxfam. The contents of this report may not be used for commercial purposes. Oxfam does not accept any liability for any damage arising from the use of the results of this study or the application of the recommendations.

Consultant team: Sandra Bhatasara, Lesley Macheka, Rosta Mate, Loveness Msofi and Admire Nyamwanza.
