



CHAPTER 4

LESSONS IN LOCALIZATION FROM THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

KEY MESSAGES

- In the aftermath of Cyclone Freddy, the Malawi Red Cross Society (MRCS) recognized that disaster response alone was not enough. The crisis catalyzed a shift toward proactive, locally led adaptation, which accelerates systemic change.
- By revising its participatory risk assessment tool, MRCS enabled communities to identify climate risks, design solutions, and take ownership of adaptation plans. Resilience proved most effective when driven by local voices and capacities.
- The evolution of global frameworks has aligned disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation. Yet, financing and implementation remain uneven, with many governments struggling to integrate long-term resilience into short-term disaster management.
- Localization is central to humanitarian reform. But while the Grand Bargain pledged more resources for local actors, less than 5% of humanitarian funding reaches them—highlighting the urgent need to match commitments with action.
- Case studies from Bangladesh, Ukraine, and the Philippines show that when local responders are empowered with resources, knowledge, and authority, they deliver faster, more relevant, and more sustainable results than international actors working alone.
- The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has embraced this shift through the Climate Action Journey, strengthening climate knowledge, building partnerships, and improving access to finance in more than 40 National Societies.

Devolving Decision Making

Addressing Structural Inequalities

Investing in Local Capacities

Building Understanding

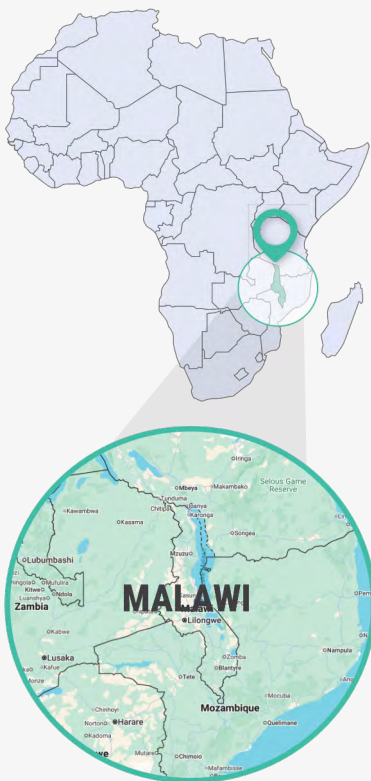
Transparency and Accountability

Collaborative Action and Investment

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Cyclone Freddy Spurs Locally Led Resilience
- Two Sides of the Same Coin
- Localizing DRR and Adaptation
- IFRC: Localization in Practice
- Lessons and Challenges from IFRC's LLA Journey





CYCLONE FREDDY SPURS LOCALLY LED RESILIENCE

When the exceptionally long-lived and powerful Cyclone Freddy tore through Malawi with devastating force in March 2023, trauma reverberated through the country. President Lazarus Chakwera declared it the worst disaster in Malawi's history—with reason. Freddy was the longest lasting tropical cyclone ever recorded worldwide and it produced the most accumulated cyclone energy of any storm in history.²⁷

Scientists warn that climate change is fueling stronger and more destructive tropical cyclones, and Freddy proved them right. Projections indicate that the proportion of storms reaching very high intensity will only grow in the years ahead.²⁸ For Malawi, which sits in the path of cyclones originating from the Indian Ocean, the stakes have risen sharply.

Freddy's devastation was followed closely by Cyclone Filipo in 2024 and Cyclone Jude in 2025, each hammering Malawi's southern districts—particularly Phalombe, Nsanje, and Mulanje. Here, vulnerabilities run deep: communities already endure seasonal droughts, strong winds, floods, and waves of disease outbreaks, making recovery after each disaster harder than before.²⁹



© Anne Wanjiru, MRCS, 2023

Malawi Red Cross Society strengthens community capacity to cope with food insecurity.



© MRCS, 2020

A Malawi Red Cross Society volunteer makes a sanitation house call in Mangochi, Malawi.

Recognizing the strong links between climate change and recurring disasters, MRCS broadened its mission in the aftermath of Freddy. Beyond responding to emergencies, it now further accelerates its support to communities in anticipating, adapting to, and recovering from the impacts of climate change.

In the wake of the 2023 disaster, MRCS established a cross-disciplinary Climate Action Taskforce, bringing together their experts from disaster management, health, water and sanitation, livelihoods, and emergency response. One of its first actions was to conduct a national climate risk assessment, mapping vulnerabilities and exposure across regions and sectors. The risks and vulnerabilities were heavily localized, necessitating both a local climate risk assessment and a locally led approach to adaptation.

To make this shift to locally led adaptation (LLA), MRCS had to break from business as usual. IFRC's participatory risk assessment tool—called the [Enhanced Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment](#) (EVCA)—was revised to better integrate climate risks and LLA Principles. New partnerships were forged, including with the Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services, the Ministry of Health, and the Malawi University of Science and Technology.

This revised approach emphasized local leadership in developing community adaptation plans. Communities were invited to share their own climate knowledge, perceptions, and solutions (see Box 1). New discussions focused on local views of climate change, the resilience of proposed interventions, and the interconnectedness of risks, including through an IFRC tool called the [Resilience Star](#).

As one local leader from Phalombe explained, “Many vulnerabilities we face are often because we fail to see how our risks are connected. Once we understand these links, we see that if we don't address one issue, we make no progress on the others.”



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Local leader from Phalombe, Malawi

Local knowledge and practice proved invaluable, though tensions sometimes arose. For example, some community members resisted changes that threatened short-term livelihoods, such as limiting charcoal production—a key income source but also a driver of deforestation and poor health. These conversations were delicate but essential.

The EVCA process was also modified to incorporate LLA Principle 3, emphasizing patient, predictable, and accessible funding, and Principle 7, promoting transparency and accountability. Project budgets were managed locally by MRCS, and information on available funding was openly shared with communities to guide collective decisions on adaptation priorities.

The resulting community adaptation plans reflect a diverse set of locally defined solutions: resilient housing, climate-smart agriculture, sustainable water management, alternative livelihoods, improved early warning systems, tree planting along riverbanks and hillsides, and the creation of forest bylaws.



© Saara Mansikkamäki, Finnish Red Cross, 2019

MRCS distributes relief items to households affected by the 2019 floods in the Mulanje district, Malawi.

Communities also explored the impacts of their solutions, for instance the effects of water pumps on groundwater levels. They embraced nature-based solutions like agroforestry, drip irrigation, organic manure, water harvesting, and crop diversification to reduce these impacts—all informed by technical discussions with agricultural, irrigation, and land resource officers.

Crucially, the process elevated local knowledge. “It is interesting how locally led adaptation seems to have more respect for local knowledge in relation to forecasts and warnings,” noted Samuel Mhango, Acting Disaster Risk Management Officer for Mulanje District. “That is often dismissed as superstition.”

MRCS adopted a training-of-trainers model to build local capacity and expertise. Farmers were trained in climate-smart agriculture and sustainable livelihoods, while Village Natural Resource Committees were trained in community-led natural resource management. Further training on disaster risk management, sustainable water management and irrigation techniques, and first aid is still to come.

For many communities, this shift has been transformative. “We are seeing something different happening now,” said the Village Headman of Nthondo in Nsanje District. “Before, we just received a project. Now, the Red Cross asks us what we need and what we think the solutions are.”

The impact of MRCS’s efforts has extended beyond Malawi’s borders. Insights gained from understanding local vulnerabilities and climate impacts have informed the design of the global Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage—particularly regarding lessons learned from Cyclone Freddy.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

The 1990s marked a turning point for how the humanitarian sector approached disaster and climate risks. It was the era of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and the release of the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Report, both of which reshaped thinking about risks and resilience.³⁰



It is interesting how locally led adaptation seems to have more respect for local knowledge in relation to forecasts and warnings.

Samuel Mhango, Acting Disaster Risk Management Officer for Mulanje District, Malawi



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BOX 1: COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN MALAWI

- Climate change is widely recognized but often misunderstood. Many do not attribute climate change to human activity. Some see it as divine punishment, while others confuse it with unrelated environmental issues.
- Awareness of adaptation initiatives remains limited, and responses to early warnings are slow.
- Communities report key impacts such as loss of livelihoods, declining agricultural productivity, infrastructure damage, and health challenges, with varying effects on different groups.
- Barriers to adaptation include poverty, lack of knowledge and resources, inconsistent participation, weak preparedness, and limited political commitment.
- Community-driven solutions to reduce charcoal-related deforestation include awareness campaigns, stricter enforcement of environmental bylaws, support for clean charcoal licensing, vocational training, and improved access to savings and loan groups.

In the 1990s, the humanitarian sector started a transition from a disaster response-focused model to one centered on disaster risk reduction. This move was solidified in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which brought to prominence the possibility of reducing the impact of disasters through a more proactive approach before a disaster strikes. The transition was formalized as global policy direction through the [2005 Hyogo Framework for Action](#), which detailed the work needed from different sectors and actors before a disaster, to reduce disaster risk.

At the same time, the growing understanding of climate change and its influence on weather extremes encouraged humanitarian actors to integrate climate information more systematically into their programs. Advocacy efforts also grew for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) to be embedded within broader climate adaptation frameworks.³¹

A milestone came with the 2012 IPCC Special Report on [Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation](#), widely known as SREX. It underscored that the impacts of extreme weather events depend as much on exposure and vulnerability of socio-ecological systems as they do on the events themselves—echoing core DRR principles.³²

In 2015, a defining year for global governance on climate and risk management, three landmark agreements were adopted: the [2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#), the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), and the [Paris Agreement](#) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Each agreement reinforced the idea of comprehensive risk reduction, creating unprecedented alignment across global frameworks.

The Sendai Framework, which set the global agenda for DRR from 2015 to 2030, provided a renewed and detailed roadmap to prevent new risks, reduce existing ones, and manage residual risks, further solidifying the humanitarian shift from solely responding to disasters to proactively reducing their causes and impact. The Paris Agreement, in Article 8, explicitly



recognizes the need to avert, minimize, and address loss and damage. Many SDGs are directly linked to disaster risks, climate resilience, and reducing human vulnerability.

At COP28 in 2023, the [UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience](#) built further on these connections, explicitly acknowledging the role of LLA and multi-hazard early warning systems in strengthening resilience. Meanwhile, the ongoing process to define indicators for the [Global Goal on Adaptation](#) is closely tied to both the Sendai Framework and the SDGs, promoting coherence across agendas.

Despite the complexity of addressing siloed perceptions, including in planning and financing DRR and climate change adaptation, promising examples are emerging at the national level. For instance, island nations in the Pacific have developed Joint National Action Plans for Disaster Risk Management (DRM) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) that combine climate change adaptation and DRM to create a coherent and comprehensive strategy for managing risks, rather than treating them as separate issues. The plans foster collaboration between previously siloed departments, improve stakeholder coordination, and enhance efficiency in managing aid and resources.

However, in many contexts, DRR and CCA are still viewed as separate fields—with DRR focused on short-term response and recovery, and adaptation on long-term transformation—making it harder for governments to deliver comprehensive, integrated risk management strategies.

LOCALIZING DRR AND ADAPTATION

Localization has become a central pillar of humanitarian reform, reshaping how aid is planned, funded, and delivered. Traditionally, the international aid system has been dominated by centralized decision-making, with funding and strategies often directed from global



The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami highlighted the need to reduce the impact of disasters before they strike.

headquarters. However, practitioners increasingly recognize that incremental adjustments are insufficient. Achieving meaningful change requires shifting power, resources, and decision-making authority closer to the people and communities most directly affected by crises.

Localization also aligns closely with the principles of inclusion and accountability to crisis-affected populations. Within the context of DRR, localization improves the quality, equity, and timeliness of aid by centering humanitarian action on local realities. By empowering local responders—who possess contextual knowledge, cultural familiarity, and long-term community trust—responses become more relevant, cost-effective, and sustainable.³³

The Sendai Framework underscores the importance of empowering local and regional authorities to lead DRR efforts. It calls for governments to allocate resources, strengthen local institutions, and develop community-driven solutions tailored to local needs and vulnerabilities.

Key humanitarian milestones, such as the [2016 World Humanitarian Summit](#) and the [Grand Bargain](#), set ambitious targets—like directing at least 25% of aid funding to local and national responders by 2020—but progress has been uneven and often disappointing.³⁴ In many places, funding to local actors remains below 5%, underscoring the gap between rhetoric and reality.³⁵

More recent frameworks, including [Grand Bargain 2.0](#) (2021–2023) and its successor for 2023–2026, recalibrate efforts around three interlinked pillars: localization, quality funding, and participation of affected communities. Additionally, standards like the [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability](#) emphasize people-centered action, using simplified, accessible language to ensure communities shape responses themselves.



MRCS volunteers ferry relief items across the river during the 2024 floods in Nkhotakota, Malawi.



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Local administration, volunteers, and NGOs are a crucial part of evacuation, early warning, and first-line relief when cyclones hit in Bangladesh.

Multiple case studies point to the successes of localization, including in response to climate disasters. Cyclone relief in Bangladesh, for instance, relies heavily on local administration, volunteers, and Bangladeshi NGOs for evacuation, early warning, and first-line relief. Investments in capacity-building enabled rapid action during Cyclone Mocha in May 2023, facilitating mass evacuations and fast debris clearance by coordinated efforts between local authorities, police, armed forces, and community volunteers.³⁶

In Ukraine, volunteer networks and local civil society organizations, including the Ukraine Red Cross Society (URCS), delivered aid at speed, reaching areas international agencies could not. Every day URCS receives, sorts, and disseminates hundreds of tons of cargo containing food, hygienic products, medicines, water, and more to their regions. Despite strong local civil capacity and evidence of cost efficiency, however, only 0.8% of UN-tracked humanitarian funding went directly to local and national NGOs.³⁷

Countries are increasingly investing in national and subnational DRR strategies aligned with the Sendai Framework. As of 2023, 131 countries—representing 67% of nations globally—had adopted national DRR strategies, and 110 countries have operational local strategies.³⁸

The Philippines serves as a strong example. Under the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act (2010), local governments are legally mandated to develop localized DRR plans and maintain dedicated funds to mitigate, prepare for, and respond to disasters. These funds often integrate climate change adaptation, ensuring that future risks—such as droughts, floods, and typhoons—are systematically addressed.

Such national frameworks represent an opportunity to leverage existing local systems in responding to climate impacts. For example, local DRR planning in the Philippines now incorporates climate change risk assessments, guiding investments in drought-resistant seeds, improved early warning systems, and community-driven adaptation practices.



© Jacqueline Nhlema, MRCS, 2016

Residents of Phalombe, Malawi, a district affected by a severe drought, harvest water from a pump.

IFRC: LOCALIZATION IN PRACTICE

IFRC is the world's largest humanitarian network, representing 191 Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies— independent organizations embedded in their communities.

The Federation recognized early on that local actors are often the first to respond when crises strike. Since its inception in 1919, IFRC has promoted the creation and strengthening of National Societies that are empowered to lead humanitarian action within their own countries.

In 2016, during the World Humanitarian Summit, the IFRC played a significant role in shaping the Grand Bargain, a landmark commitment by humanitarian actors to localize aid. The Federation championed the principle that humanitarian response should be “as local as possible, as international as necessary”.

In 2018, the IFRC's approach was outlined in [Strategy 2030](#), with transformation areas for thematic priorities such as climate and environmental crises, including:

- Supporting and developing National Societies as strong and effective local actors, including through building operational, financial, and technical skills, models, and approaches to better anticipate and adapt to disaster and crises.
- Ensuring trust and accountability to put communities in the lead in designing, driving, and evaluating programs.
- Financing the future by supporting National Societies to invest in innovative financing models, with a focus on addressing vulnerabilities.

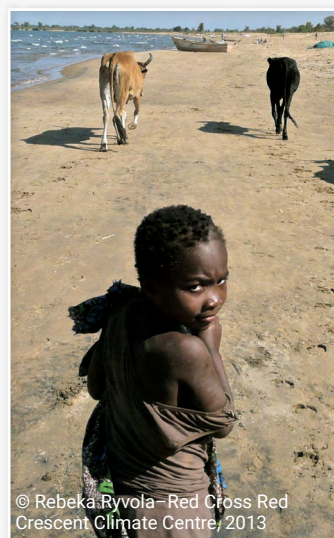
Baking in Climate Adaptation

Recognizing the growing climate crisis as a humanitarian crisis, IFRC launched the [Global Climate Resilience Platform](#) (GCRP) in 2022, to fund locally led climate action. The GCRP mobilizes resources, partnerships, and technical support to enable National Societies and

local communities to design and implement risk-informed, sustainable, and locally led adaptation solutions. The GCRP funds a range of pre-approved adaptation actions, based on climate risk assessments and prioritization by communities. This includes a new **Pooled Fund**, designed to channel multi-donor, multi-year, non-projectized finance to the local level.

In 2023, the IFRC launched a **Climate Action Journey** (CAJ), a dedicated approach designed to help National Societies initiate, deepen, and scale up climate action and locally led adaptation. The CAJ focuses on strengthening climate-risk knowledge and capacity, building partnerships for action, and improving access to climate finance. Currently being rolled out across more than 40 National Societies worldwide, the CAJ builds on existing community-based disaster risk reduction practices while shifting the network toward LLA, empowering the communities most at risk to lead the development of climate-resilient solutions.

This shift involves several key actions. National Societies are investing in enhanced climate assessments and knowledge-sharing, from community perceptions of climate change to national hydrometeorological institutes. They are forging new partnerships, from local agricultural extension workers to national climate ministries. They are building stronger capacities for financial and project management at the most local levels, supported by the national and global IFRC network for planning and financing.



© Rebeka Ryvola - Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, 2013

A child from Mphunga, Malawi, an area affected by floods and droughts, walks along the lake.



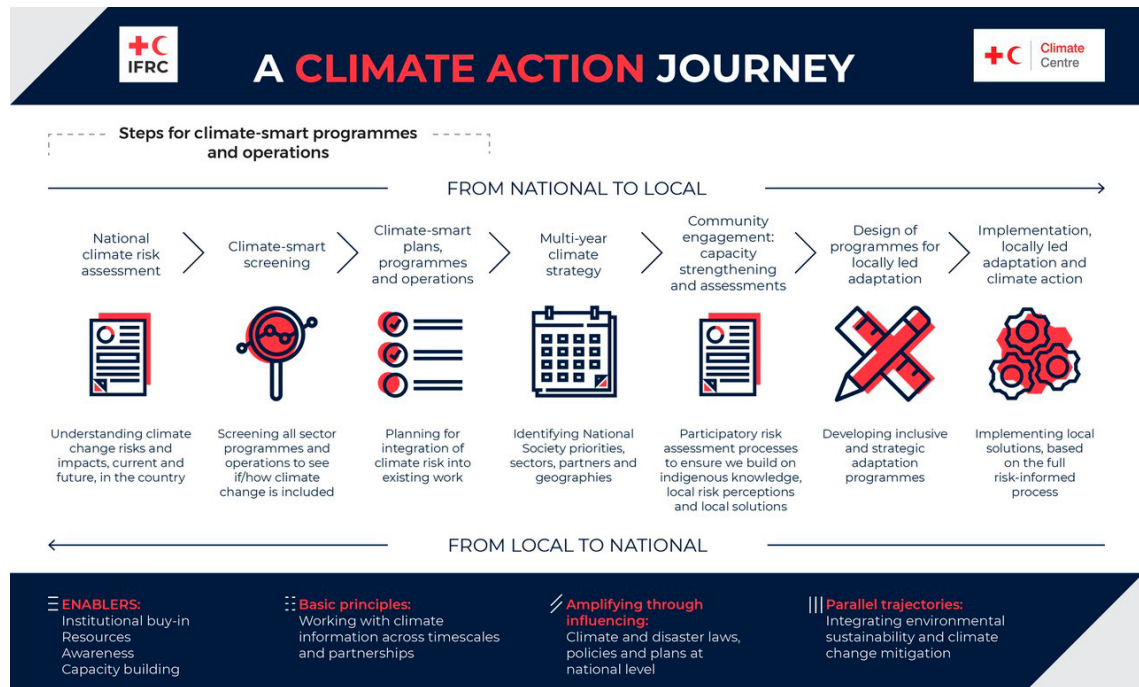
© Jacqueline Nhlema, MRCS

Members of Mzati GCT in Ndirande, Malawi cover a house with plastic to protect it from strong winds.



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FIGURE 1. IFRC's Climate Action Journey

Source: IFRC and Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, 2023

The first LLA pilot projects under CAJ were launched in Malawi, Nigeria, and Pakistan. CAJ provided a collaborative and flexible framework to integrate climate risk considerations into existing humanitarian programs, strategies, and emergency operations, and empower at-risk communities to design, lead, and scale up LLA.

In 2024, the LLA projects expanded to 11 new countries, but funding constraints led to the suspension of some activities in early 2025. Critical aspects will, however, continue in eight countries with new funding, and the overall approach has been integrated into multiple projects under the GCRP.

The CAJ is currently undergoing evaluation, incorporating early lessons and refining the process to better center LLA from the start and engage communities from the outset (see Table 1, listing how DRR practices are being adapted to reflect LLA).

The Red Cross was also a founding member of [Partners for Resilience](#) (PfR), a global network of 50 civil society organizations working in hazard-prone areas to strengthen community resilience through integrated risk management. PfR supported the integration of DRR into over 50 Gram Panchayat Development Plans (local development plans) in India. District disaster management plans were drafted for seven districts, and over €8 million was leveraged for their implementation.³⁹

LESSONS AND CHALLENGES FROM IFRC'S LLA JOURNEY

Preliminary insights from the IFRC on the application of each LLA Principle are summarized in Box 2. Several key challenges have emerged so far, including aligning national climate risk information with local knowledge and community perceptions, managing expectations

around climate finance and adaptation options, and strengthening financial and project management systems across the entire chain, from the community level to donors.

TABLE 1. Revised DRR Practices to Operationalize LLA Principles

COMMUNITY-BASED DRR PRACTICES	NEW PRACTICE TO INTEGRATE LLA IN 2025	LLA PRINCIPLES
Participatory Risk Assessment: Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA)	Participatory Risk Assessment: Enhanced Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (EVCA), with climate change considerations strengthened and integrated	Principle 2 address structural inequalities Principle 4 invest in local capabilities Principle 5 build a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty
No separate trainings or sessions on climate change	Dedicated discussions on climate impacts and LLA with communities at the start of the EVCA	Principle 4 invest in local capabilities Principle 5 build a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty
Knowledge, attitude, and practice surveys conducted in some DRR projects	Community perception surveys conducted to provide insights into power relations, cultural behaviors, and risk perceptions	Principle 2 address structural inequalities
Stakeholder mapping conducted to identify partners	National and local stakeholder mapping conducted to inform collaborations to design, implement, and plan, including across sectors (agricultural, climate, environmental etc.)	Principle 4 invest in local capabilities Principle 8 collaborative action and investment
Additional stakeholder dialogs on the outcomes of the EVCA are not always organized	Additional dialogs and consultations after the EVCA with national experts (for instance, on agricultural extension services) to ensure proposed activities are climate resilient and sustainable, and to support innovation	Principle 5 build a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty Principle 8 collaborative action and investment
Additional discussions on the complexity of trade-offs between immediate needs and long-term needs are not always facilitated	Discussions on trade-offs between immediate humanitarian needs, and long-term, sustainable options	Principle 5 build a robust understanding of climate risk and uncertainty
Transparency on available funding not standard practice	Transparency on available funding for community-led interventions	Principle 7 ensure transparency and accountability
Flexible funding (with some boundaries) provided by headquarters, with activity log frames and budgets	Flexible funding provided by local Red Cross/Red Crescent branches with donor pre-approved menu of options. Plans, timelines, and budgets decided locally	Principle 1 devolve decision-making to the lowest appropriate level Principle 3 patient, predictable, accessible funding



One of the most persistent challenges for National Societies has been encouraging national and local partners to look beyond current risks and actively plan for future climate impacts. To address this, minimum standards for local climate-smart DRR were developed as part of the [Guide to Climate-Smart Programmes and Humanitarian Operations](#). This guide supports programs and operations in integrating short-term weather and seasonal forecasts with long-term climate projections when designing and implementing activities.⁴⁰

BOX 2: REFLECTIONS ON IFRC'S LLA JOURNEY

Devolving decision-making to the lowest appropriate level

National Societies are empowered to facilitate LLA, and, while headquarters remain involved in analyzing assessment findings, decisions are made as close to the community as possible. Branches support discussions, plan consolidation, and financing, ensuring communities understand funding eligibility and constraints.

Addressing structural inequalities

Vulnerabilities are assessed across different groups through the EVCA process, including women, youth, people with disabilities, displaced populations, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized ethnic groups. The tools ensure diverse perspectives inform prioritization and planning, although broader inequalities still require more targeted action.

Providing patient, predictable, accessible funding

New IFRC GCRP projects give communities greater control over designing and implementing adaptation solutions. Agreements with donors include clear guidelines on funding limitations, and in-country expertise is engaged to ensure proposed measures are sustainable and avoid maladaptation.

Investing in local capabilities

Capacity building efforts focus on improving climate risk-informed planning, implementation, and local-level financial and project management, ensuring communities are equipped to lead climate action beyond the life of individual projects.

Building robust understanding of climate risks

National climate risk assessments deepen understanding of climate impacts across regions and groups. Training local facilitators to interpret these findings and lead community climate risk assessments and discussions has begun but requires further investment to ensure meaningful participation.

Flexible programming and continuous learning

Donor flexibility has been critical to adaptive programming and ongoing learning. Continued advocacy aims to secure similar flexibility from future donors.

Transparency and accountability

Community budgets and the sustainability of proposed solutions are openly discussed with all stakeholders, ensuring informed decision-making and mutual trust.

Collaborative action and investment

Stakeholder mapping at both local and national levels has strengthened partnerships, while communities are encouraged to identify their own collaborators. While ownership of these collaborations rests with the communities, it remains to be seen how sustainable they are beyond project timelines.



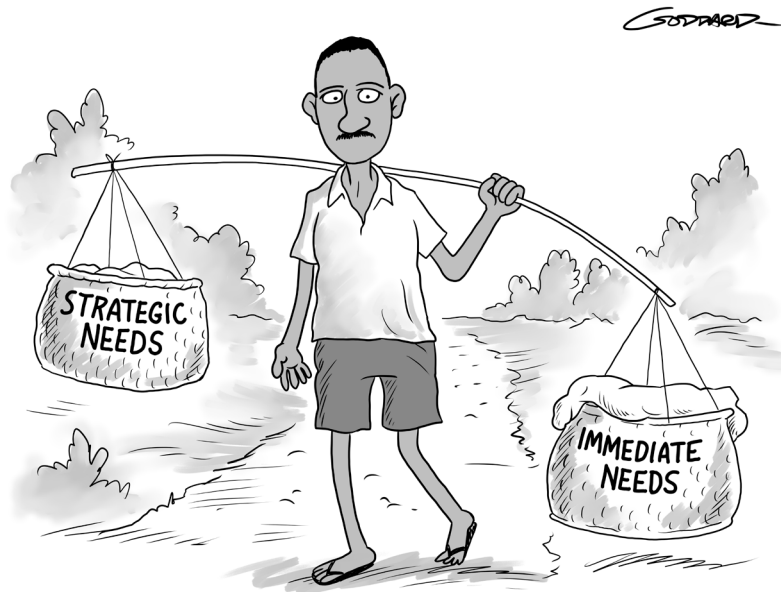
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Members of Chitsanzo Group Cash Transfer in Malawi clear drainage for waterways.

Despite these advances, communicating the complexities of climate change remains an ongoing challenge. Capacity building continues to be a central focus, with innovative approaches such as [climate risk storylines](#) helping communities make sense of multiple possible climate scenarios. These storylines provide plural and conditional explanations rather than single, definitive projections, making it easier to translate complex scientific data into actionable local strategies and triangulate climate information with community knowledge.⁴¹

Embedding deeper reflections on power dynamics, decision-making, and cultural norms also remains difficult, particularly given IFRC's neutrality and impartiality principles. Nevertheless, participatory risk assessments and community risk perception surveys have proven valuable in facilitating inclusive discussions and ensuring that diverse community needs are represented in adaptation planning.

Another key insight is that not all locally proposed solutions automatically lead to long-term resilience. For example, some communities prioritized boreholes or water pumps in arid regions, which risk depleting groundwater supplies over time. These situations highlight the need for stronger collaboration between communities and local experts—such as water authorities, land-use planners, and agricultural specialists—to balance immediate needs with long-term sustainability.



Clive Goddard / CartoonStock.com

Finally, LLA must also support difficult conversations on the limits of adaptation. Solutions that are effective today may not remain viable in the future or in different contexts. Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and joint learning among communities, experts, and donors are crucial to ensure that adaptation strategies remain relevant, flexible, and effective over time.