

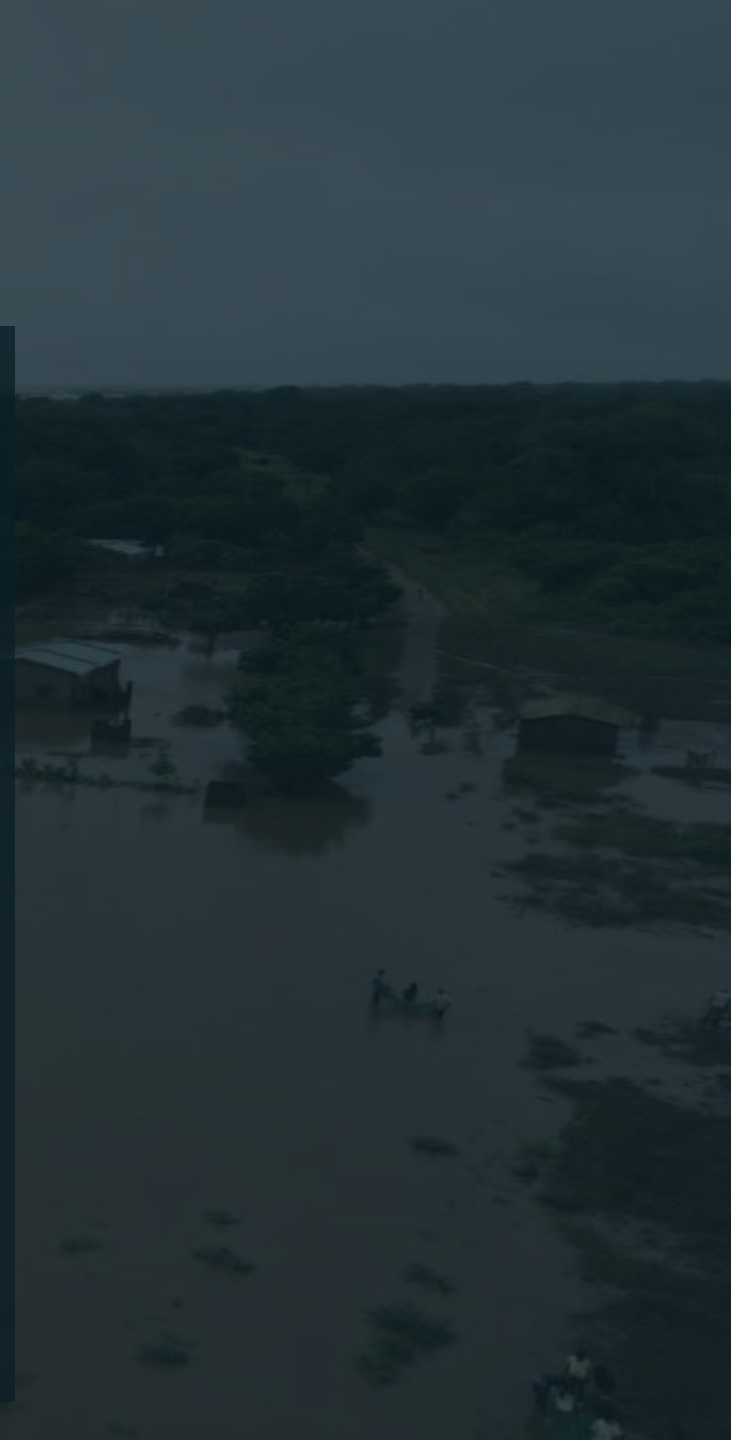
MZUZU UNIVERSITY

When the Warning Arrives but the Action Doesn't

Understanding Household Early Action Ahead of Cyclone Freddy in Makhuwira, Chikwawa District, Malawi

Charles Chunga

Faculty of Environmental Sciences



The Study



World Map, showing Malawi. Source: www.freeworldmaps.net

- Chikwawa District, Southern Malawi — one of Malawi's most flood-prone districts
- Tropical Cyclone Freddy (March 2023): 676 deaths and over 560,000 people displaced
- Makhuwira: Covers 63 km²; highly susceptible to floods; limited economic diversification
- The problem: Flood impacts remain severe despite policy commitment and implementation of early warning systems
- This study: 378 households surveyed door-to-door, 17 Key Informant Interviews and 3 Focus Groups Discussions

THE FINDING

Most households received the warning. Far fewer took early action.

78.6%

received an early warning before
Cyclone Freddy

40%

took any early action at all

30.7%

evacuated before the disaster —
most others moved too late

<16%

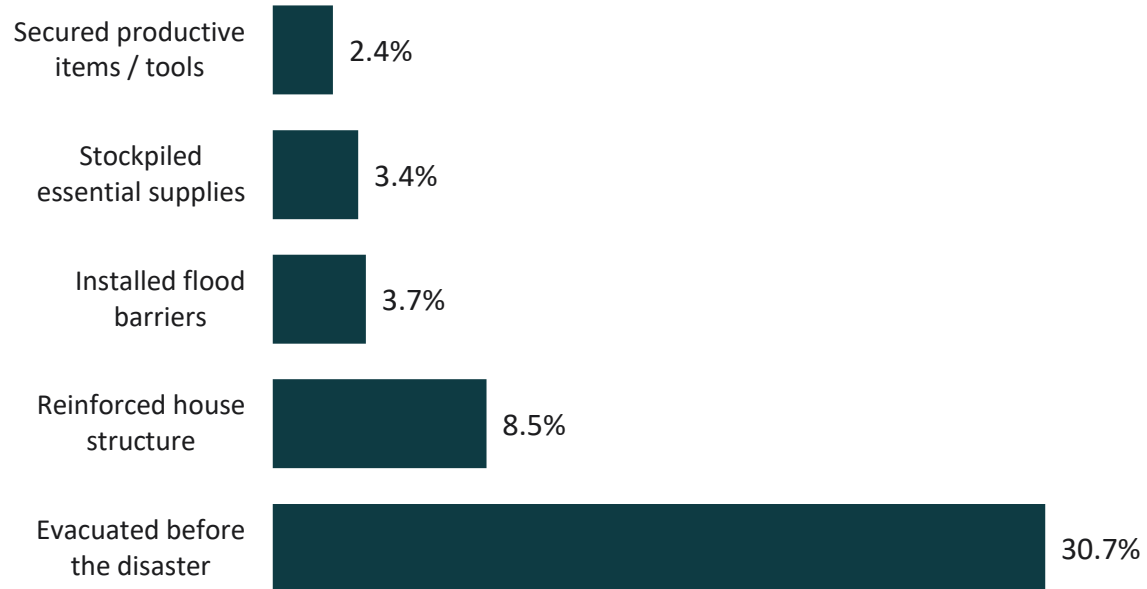
took asset protective measures



Mobile Audio Van Publicity (Photo: MRCS)

THE ACTIONS TAKEN

What Early Action Looked Like



A household in Makhuwira protects its house by constructing a floodwater barrier well ahead of flooding (Photo: fieldwork)

“There is a river near my two houses... my wife and I used stones and sandbags to create floodwater barriers. As a result, only one house was damaged.” — Household respondent, Makhuwira

Why Some Households Acted, and Others Didn't



What Held Households Back

- Warnings that arrived too late to act on
- Low risk perception
- Limited resources – financial and material
- Limited access to safe evacuation centres
- Delayed support at evacuation centers



What Helped Households Act

- Financial resources
- Preparedness – Prior training
- Community coordination
- Choosing low-cost protective actions

What Closes the Gap Between Warning and Action?

1. Timely warning and clear messages

1. Capacity to act

- Financial resources; Materials and equipment; Knowledge of protective actions

2. Accessible, well-resourced evacuation centres

3. Community coordination

- Households and resource mobilisation



Savala Evacuation Center — the only designated evacuation site serving Makhuwira. (Photo: fieldwork)

Households acted when warnings were combined with the means to respond.

The Role of Partnerships

01 Government (District Council & DCCMS)

- Issued and coordinated early warnings.
- Worked with traditional leaders to localise messages and coordinate community response

02 Traditional Leaders & Local Disaster Committees (ADPMC, VCPC)

- Served as the bridge between communities and government agencies.
- Relayed warnings through audio publicity
- Mobilised households to prepare and evacuate.

03 Malawi Red Cross Society (MRCS)

- Strengthened local disaster committees through training, equipment, and ongoing technical support.

04 Humanitarian Partners (e.g., WFP, MRCS)

- Supported evacuation centres with food, relief supplies, and other essential assistance.

Effective early action depends on coordination — no single actor closes the gap alone.

Policy and Practical Implications

1. **Clearly communicate the expected hazard, likely impacts, and recommended protective actions.**
 - Use interactive communication channels; Reduce bureaucratic delays
2. **Strengthen local disaster committees i.e. VCPCs**
3. **Invest in evacuation infrastructure**
 - Establish additional, well-resourced evacuation centres
 - Open complementary centers before impact — not after
 - Ensure timely support
4. **Disaster preparedness training**
 - Include general community members
5. **Support vulnerable households with anticipatory assistance**



Community preparedness training facilitated by the Malawi Red Cross Society to strengthen local capacity for early action. (Photo: MRCS)

Thank you