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Local Transitional Justice Practices for Climate Justice

The Case of Nkhulambe, Malawi

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Introduction

When Tropical Cyclone Freddy hit Malawi in 2023, the rural area of Nkhulambe was nearly destroyed by flooding and landslides. Today, residents continue to struggle with the cyclone's aftermath, even as they manage long-term climate change and new waves of extreme weather events. Out of this hardship have emerged community-led climate responses that offer new ways of thinking about climate action and working towards climate justice.

This report applies a transformative transitional justice lens to Nkhulambe residents' engagements with climate change. Typically used to deal with gross human rights abuses, transitional justice is an established field of theory and practice that is designed to acknowledge the truth of past harms, provide redress to those affected, ensure the accountability of those responsible, and create an institutional environment that deters future harms. A transformative approach to transitional justice goes further to address the root causes of harms and provoke substantive social change. Prioritising the knowledge and solutions of those most affected, it takes the form of bottom-up, community-led measures, which stand alone as well as contribute to top-down, official processes.

Applying this lens allows a more holistic view of both climate impacts and climate responses in Nkhulambe. Focusing on community experiences, it reveals that creeping climate change combined with disasters like Cyclone Freddy have resulted in a wider range of profound and lasting climate harms than commonly acknowledged by the public and even many climate experts. These include loss of life, physical health, homes, essential infrastructure, education, livelihoods, food security, cultural practices, social order, and mental health.

This lens also shows that residents have developed their own climate responses that tackle more fully the manifold climate harms they have experienced than top-down climate responses to date. Government-sponsored initiatives have tended to be short-term rather than sustained, and premised on one-way information transfers rather than two-way dialogue and collaboration between state actors and affected residents. In addition to being more pluralist and cooperative, residents' climate responses combine *forward-looking* solutions, such as emergency preparedness and reforestation, with *backwards-looking* solutions that acknowledge the truth of climate harms in the area and promote redress through memorialisation and advocacy for participatory reforms.

Nkhulambe residents' efforts can be read as climate-focused transformative transitional justice in practice. They are community-led measures that address climate harms which occurred in the past, while building solidarity in the present, in order to prevent and reduce the harms of future climate events. Moreover, they have the potential to complement and strengthen top-down national and international efforts, making them more inclusive and responsive to communities affected by climate harms, as well as opening the door to more equitable climate action.

The findings presented here are based on field research with 64 participants in Nkhulambe in September–October 2025. This research included discussions with focus groups of 10 residents each in three traditional authority areas of Nkhulambe, and key informant interviews with three community leaders and one representative of a local civil society organisation. It also included a half-

day workshop with 30 residents, in which the group conducted a participatory community mapping exercise of climate harms within Nkhulambe and climate responses implemented by residents.[1]

Organised and facilitated by colleagues from Malawi's Civil Society Network on Climate Change (CISONECC), these research activities were conducted with a representative cross-section of the area's population, including members of community leadership structures and committees for youth, women, and persons with disabilities, using snowball sampling.[2]

This report begins with a discussion of the links between transitional justice and climate justice. After outlining the climate impacts in Nkhulambe, it details participants' descriptions of the climate harms in the area. The report then examines top-down and bottom-up responses to these climate harms, before discussing the value of participatory measures that strengthen climate responses as a whole. It concludes with reflections on the new avenues towards climate justice opened by a transformative transitional justice framework.

Transitional and Climate Justice

Transitional justice – especially transformative transitional justice – offers a useful lens and tested set of tools for addressing climate harms in a holistic and sustainable manner that is in line with climate justice goals. Since gaining prominence in the late 1980s, transitional justice has become a go-to approach for dealing with past harms in diverse transition contexts. While the field is facing setbacks and efforts to delegitimise it in the current geopolitical moment, transitional justice processes continue to be implemented across the world. They are commonly applied in countries transitioning out of authoritarianism or war to deal with systematic abuses, and in more consolidated democracies to address legacies of colonialism or slavery.[3]

Usually associated with four main measures – truth commissions, reparations, prosecutions, and institutional reforms – transitional justice is designed to recover the truth of how past harms were committed and which conditions enabled them; provide multifaceted redress to those affected; identify and hold accountable those who perpetrated and enabled the harms; and create an environment that acknowledges past harms and prevents future harms.[4]

With 40 years of application, transformative approaches emerged in response to critiques of mainstream transitional justice. Instead of importing measures used in other countries and centring

1 This research is part of a larger project linking transitional justice and climate justice. See Jasmina Brankovic and Samuel Sontag, *Transformative Transitional Justice and Climate Action: Nurturing Synergies for Climate Justice* (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2026).

2 The participants requested anonymity. CISONECC colleagues provided interpretation between Chichewa and English during the field research. The participant quotes spotlighted throughout the report are from their translations. For CISONECC's view on the links between climate justice and transitional justice in Malawi, see Julius Ng'oma, "Building Climate Justice through Transitional Justice: A New Path for Malawi's Resilience," African Transitional Justice Hub (13 April 2026), https://atjhub.csvr.org.za/building-climate-justice-through-transitional-justice-a-new-path-for-malawis-resilience/

3 Marcos Zunino, *Justice Framed: A Genealogy of Transitional Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

4 Jens Meierhenrich, Alexander Laban Hinton and Lawrence Douglas, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

state-led processes, as is common in mainstream practice, transformative transitional justice prioritises local and contextualised experiences, resources and solutions, particularly of victims and survivors. It promotes bottom-up measures led by actors beyond the state, which can proceed separately from as well as feed into top-down measures.[5]

Furthermore, instead of using a narrow human rights discourse that side-lines socioeconomic rights and historical injustices, transformative transitional justice tackles historical injustices and socioeconomic rights abuses as root causes, drivers and amplifiers of harms, while acknowledging the continuum between past and ongoing harms. And rather than emphasising short-term legal-institutional measures, it embraces open-ended, iterative and participatory measures that promote pluralism of participants and ideas. Ultimately, it goes beyond reform to challenge and shift power structures that maintain the inequalities that tend to drive harms.[6]

As Sonja Klinsky and I have argued,[7] a transformative transitional justice framework offers new ways of thinking about the multifaceted effects of climate change and designing climate responses that adequately address them. It can help generate a shared understanding and record of how climate impacts lead to profound climate harms, in addition to the nature of the harms, whom they affect, and which circumstances enable them. It can identify forms of material and symbolic reparation that adequately serve those most affected by climate harms. It can also create the conditions for state and non-state actors to take responsibility for climate harms, while enabling an institutional environment that mitigates those harms. Thus, this transitional justice approach opens pathways to contextually responsive and transformative climate action, from the local to the global level.

Climate impacts are likely to continue, as climate change causes long-term shifts in temperature and weather, yet transformative transitional justice helps prevent and mitigate future climate *harms* of the kind examined in this report. Moreover, transformative transitional justice has the capacity to deal with global and systemic challenges and diffuse harms, such as those caused by historical and ongoing carbon emitters from the 'global North,' with examples being processes that address deep-rooted socioeconomic harms and the legacies of colonialism and slavery.[8]

As I have discussed elsewhere,[9] transformative transitional justice overlaps with climate justice practices, which similarly acknowledge the intersectional and intergenerational harms of climate

5 Paul Gready and Simon Robins, eds., *From Transitional to Transformative Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Matthew Evans, ed., *Transitional and Transformative Justice: Critical and International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2019).

6 Matthew Evans, ed., *Beyond Transitional Justice Transformative Justice and the State of the Field (or non-field)* (London: Routledge, 2022); Jasmina Brankovic and Simon Robins, *Mainstreaming Popular Participation in Transitional Justice: Lessons from Multilateral, State and Civil Society Actors in The Gambia and Somalia* (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2025).

7 Sonja Klinsky and Jasmina Brankovic, *The Global Climate Regime and Transitional Justice* (London: Routledge, 2018).

8 See, e.g., Laura García Martín, "Challenging the Transitional Justice Paradigm: Addressing ESRs Violations in Transitional Justice Processes," *Anuario Español de Derecho Internacional* 35 (2019): 655–677; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Reparatory Justice for People of African Descent* (2024).

9 Jasmina Brankovic, "Transitional and Climate Justice: New Opportunities for Justice in Transition," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17, no. 2 (2023): 185–191.

change, prioritise local-level experiences and solutions, promote iterative and participatory climate responses up to the international level, and recognise the value of pluralism in beliefs and practices.

In fact, there is already an example of a transformative transitional justice process for climate harms. In 2025, my colleagues and I worked with two South African communities affected by climate harms, in Newcastle and Dannhauser, to collaboratively design and implement four measures: a truth-telling process on climate harms; a commemoration event for past climate harms, with an educational workshop on climate responses; a physical memorial honouring all those affected by climate harms; and reform-focused advocacy for participatory climate response planning and implementation.[10]

Learning from the wealth of experiences and solutions shared by participants in the South African initiative, this research in Malawi aimed to determine whether there are already community-led practices within an area severely affected by climate change that previously had not been documented together and that could be read as instances of transformative transitional justice. A positive finding would indicate that affected communities themselves develop forward- and backwards-looking solutions that enable justice in the climate transition.

As this report shows, applying a transformative transitional justice lens to community climate responses in Nkhulambe and similarly affected areas indeed reveals new ways of thinking about climate action.

Climate Impacts in Nkhulambe

> *"This area has been highly affected due to climate change. There is a great change in rainfall patten if we compare now and the past years. The rainfall amount has reduced and the start of the rains has changed. We were planting our crops in October or November, but now we plant in December or January. The rains also end earlier, before the crops are ready. This has caused widespread hunger in this community."* – Community leader, Nkulambe

Malawi is highly vulnerable to climate change, with changing weather patterns leading to severe flooding and extreme heat and drought, in addition to an increasing rate of tropical storms and cyclones. The population is particularly vulnerable because of a dependence on rain-fed agriculture and low adaptive capacity, with climate impacts exacerbating existing vulnerabilities to poverty and food insecurity. While its climate responses are still under development, the government has put in place policies and laws to guide these responses. These include the National Climate Change Management Policy (2016), the National Resilience Strategy (2018–2030), the National Adaptation Plan Framework (2020), and the Disaster Risk Management Act (2023). The government is also

10 Jasmina Brankovic, *Transformative Transitional Justice for Climate Justice: Lessons from Practice* (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2026). The publications, videos and photographs from this initiative are available here: https://www.csvr.org.za/transformative-transitional-justice-for-climate-justice/

developing Nationally Determined Contributions as a signatory to the Paris Agreement.[11] In the meantime, climate change continues to wreak havoc in the country.

Nkhulambe and the surrounding Phalombe District have been among the hardest-hit parts of Malawi. As participants noted, the local climate has been changing for several decades, but climate impacts have become more frequent and extreme in recent years. Residents have experienced erratic rainfall patterns and shifts in the timing and duration of the rainy season, which have led to severe flooding alongside dry spells and droughts. As a result, they have struggled with failing crops, falling agricultural yields, and increasing numbers of pests such as armyworms. They have also faced increasing food insecurity and a rise in diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases over time.[12]

In addition to these everyday and ongoing climate impacts, participants highlighted the devastation wrought by extreme weather events, discussing the severe flooding that affected Nkhulambe in 2015 and the catastrophic effects of Cyclone Idai in 2019 and Tropical Storm Ana and Cyclone Gombe in 2022. Cyclone Freddy, which nearly destroyed the community in 2023, has had lasting effects on residents' lives that have been exacerbated by subsequent weather events.[13] Participants described Nkhulambe as a "trap zone," as the area is overlooked by a mountain prone to landslides and surrounded by three rivers that make it susceptible to flooding.[14]

Reflecting on the causes of climate change and their impacts in Nkhulambe, many participants argued that 'developed' countries and corporations, especially in European countries and the United States, have contributed the most to historical and ongoing carbon emissions. For them, these actors bear the greatest responsibility for addressing climate change and its effects, including in countries and communities that have contributed the least emissions, like theirs.[15] This would encompass mitigation, adaptation, and addressing loss and damage alike.

Participants also discussed the responsibility of the Malawian government. For them, the government's obligation is to learn from and work with affected communities to develop holistic climate responses

11 William Chadza, Dorothy Tembo and Jackie Nankhunda, *Climate Change Policy and Legal Framework in Malawi: Towards a Comprehensive Policy Framework* (Blantyre: Centre for Environmental Policy and Advocacy, n.d.); Suzgo Kaunda et al., "Tracking Progress Made in Implementing and Achieving Malawi's Nationally Determined Contributions under Article 4 of the Paris Agreement," in 2024 *Biennial Transparency Report* (Lilongwe: Government of Malawi, 2025).

12 Community workshop, Nkhulambe, 30 September 2025 (hereinafter "CW"); focus group discussion, Nkhulambe, 30 September 2025 (hereinafter "FG1"); focus group discussion, Nkhulambe, 1 October 2025 (hereinafter "FG2"); focus group discussion, Nkhulambe, 1 October 2025 (hereinafter "FG3"). See also United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, *Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices on Flood Early Warnings and Early Action among Local Communities in Zomba and Phalombe, Malawi* (2023); Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services, *Climate Risk Maps: Phalombe District* (2023).

13 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3; interview, community leader, Nkhulambe, 30 September 2025 (hereinafter "IN1"); interview, community leader, Nkhulambe, 1 October 2025 (hereinafter "IN2"); interview, community leader, Nkhulambe, 1 October 2025 (hereinafter "IN3"); interview 4, civil society organisation representative, Nkhulambe, 3 October 2025 (hereinafter "IN4"). See also Jack McBrams, "'I'm Tired of Surviving. I Want to Live Again': Cyclone Freddy's Legacy in Malawi," Dialogue Earth, 15 July 2025, https://dialogue.earth/en/climate/im-tired-of-surviving-i-want-to-live-again-cyclone-freddys-legacy-in-malawi/; Fiona Braka, Ebenezer Obi Daniel, Joseph Okeibunor, Neema Kimambo Rusibamayila, Ishata Nannie Conteh, Otim Patrick Cossy Ramadan, Jayne Byakika-Tusiime, Chol Thabo Yur, Emmanuel Maurice Ochien, Mathew Kagoli, Annie Chauma-Mwale, Dick Chamla and Abdou Salam Gueye, "Effects of Tropical Cyclone Freddy on the Social Determinants of Health: The Narrative Review of the Experience in Malawi," *BMJ Public Health* 2, no. 1 (2024): e000512.

14 FG1.

15 FG1; F2; F3; IN4.

that adequately address the climate harms experienced in areas like Nkhulambe.[16] The government would then bring these community-informed responses to the international level, with potential impacts on the global climate regime.

However, participants in many cases focused on the responsibility of local residents. For example, most asserted that residents cut down trees for charcoal or to gain access to arable land – practices they say drive climate change and harms.[17] Some noted that residents understand climate change as God's punishment for their moral failings or as a Biblical sign of the end of the world.[18] Others mentioned supernatural causes of climate change, for example that Cyclone Freddy was punishment through witchcraft for residents' support of the political opposition in 2023.[19]

One the one hand, these remarks indicate an internalisation of blame for climate change and harms.[20] On the other, they suggest that the community is an arena – unlike the global or even the national level – in which participants believe residents have some degree of influence and control over climate issues. Certainly, they have learnt from their experiences of climate harms and developing their own community-led climate responses, as discussed below.

Manifold and Ongoing Climate Harms

When asked about the climate harms they have experienced due to climate impacts, participants shared a wide range of harms that have deep-seated and long-lasting effects in Nkhulambe. These include loss of life, physical health, homes, essential infrastructure, education, livelihoods, food security, cultural practices, social order, and mental health, with particularly severe effects on vulnerable groups.

> *"Houses were destroyed, lives were lost, hospitals fell, farms were destroyed. In total 67 people died due to Cyclone Freddy. In addition, school was disrupted as most people sought refuge in the classrooms. There was also an impact on our cultural heritage, as people ran from the disaster naked as well as the washing away of graveyards."* – Community leader, Nkhulambe

Participants tended to begin by talking about loss of lives and loved ones. In Nkhulambe, 67 people died in Cyclone Freddy, including children.[21] Participants watched as their family members were washed away by floods. Some victims' bodies were never recovered, while others had to be buried in shared graves after the disaster. Children were orphaned, with some forced to become heads

16 FG1; FG2; FG3.

17 FG1; FG2; FG3; IN1; IN2; IN3.

18 FG1; FG2.

19 FG3.

20 See also Chimwemwe Richard Chavinda, "Discursive Construction of Climate Change Knowledge in Lake Chilwa Basin, Malawi," *Environmental Communication* 19, no. 3 (2025): 516–530, arguing this self-blame is the result of fear-based messaging by climate experts in affected communities, aimed at driving home the urgency of climate change.

21 FG2.

of their households. Severe injuries were widespread, in numerous cases resulting in permanent disabilities.[22] In the aftermath of the cyclone, government officials instructed residents to move to temporary disaster relief camps for their safety. Waterborne diseases, including cholera, spread quickly through the camps due to overcrowding and limited access to health services. Health and adequate healthcare continue to be a challenge.[23]

> *"My son was washed away together with his house when he was sleeping. He was gone and was never found. By morning, the devastation was huge. Many houses were destroyed, a lot of people dead or missing."* – Community leader, Nkhulambe

The floodwaters swept away many buildings in the area and left others so damaged that they have still not been repaired. Entire households – including those headed by children and other vulnerable residents – were left without a place to live and continue to face the likelihood of permanent displacement. Belongings gathered across lifetimes were destroyed within moments.[24] Damage to infrastructure was severe. The local hospital and other clinics were washed away or damaged, which blocked access to essential healthcare, especially as some have still not been completely repaired. Police posts and trading centres were destroyed, affecting security and livelihoods. Bridges and roads were swept away, which continues to affect residents' mobility, especially during the rainy season. Electricity has not been restored to the area.[25]

In addition to destroying and damaging school buildings and other infrastructure, the cyclone caused long-term harms to education. School buildings still standing were used as shelters by residents left without housing. Children and young people did not have access to education for several months after the heavy floods – and school continues to be disrupted. Textbooks and other educational materials were washed away or ruined. Most families are still struggling to buy new materials, not to mention to cover school fees and even provide enough food for children to be able to focus in school.[26]

Part of these families' struggle is that livelihoods have been heavily affected by the cyclone and other climate impacts. Participants pointed out that livestock and crops were washed away, irrigation systems collapsed, and many hectares were covered with mud and stones by the floodwaters. Landslides from the mountainside inundated farmland with sand, which has left soil infertile. Staple crops such as maize, rice, beans and sweet potatoes no longer grow properly, forcing residents to turn to less familiar and nutritious alternatives like sugarcane, which can better withstand the sandy soil.[27] Post-cyclone forest degradation and disrupted river systems continue to drive erosion and intensify flooding.[28]

22 CW.
23 CW; FG1.
24 FG2; FG3; IN2.
25 CW; FG2; FG3.
26 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3.
27 FG1.
28 CW.

At a time when residents are struggling to grow crops and earning less, fertiliser and farming equipment have become more expensive. Farmers have been forced to look for other employment, often agricultural piecework, which is difficult to find, low paid, and short term.[29] As most people in the area are reliant on farming not only for their income but also daily food, these climate harms have had a lasting effect on livelihoods, with knock-on effects on education, healthcare and other essentials.[30] At a more fundamental level, they have significantly reduced food security, with participants often echoing one interviewee's remark that "there is a big challenge with food and financial support in the area – many families are facing hunger in the community."[31]

Participants noted that the many climate harms residents have experienced have had various cultural effects. The floodwaters washed away graveyards and grave markers and exposed coffins, which has disrupted cultural practices related to burial and honouring the dead and ancestors. As mentioned above, some families never recovered the remains of their loved ones after the cyclone, or could not bury them according to the usual practices. Moreover, participants noted that many residents had their clothing torn away by the floodwaters, which exposed their bodies and caused lasting shame and loss of dignity within families and communities due to cultural stigma.[32]

The social order has similarly been affected. Marriages have crumbled under the stress of the climate impacts and harms, and relationships among generations within households have changed. Participants noted that scarcity has led to a rise in the number of early marriages, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and, in some cases, sex work, as well as an increase in risk behaviour among young people and instances of theft and other petty crime. Moreover, a rising number of young men, and some young women, have decided to migrate to Mozambique in search of livelihoods, changing the social makeup of the area.[33]

These manifold climate harms, according to participants, have caused trauma and other mental health challenges, which affect not only individuals but also families and communities, including across generations. Adults and children are struggling with losing loved ones and witnessing horrific events during the cyclone, as well as loss of home, livelihood, security and a positive sense of the future, not to mention hunger and the persistent threat of hunger. Trauma is triggered by every heavy rainfall, with some residents repeatedly spending the night in nearby trees, fearing another severe flood. These mental health harms make everyday life difficult to manage. Mental health and psychosocial support is largely lacking in the area.[34]

> *"We are slowly recovering but the fear is still there. Sometimes people sleep in trees when it's raining because of the fear."* – Community leader, Nkhulambe

29 FG1.
30 FG2; FG3.
31 IN2.
32 CW; IN1; IN2.
33 CW; FG1; FG3.
34 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3; IN4.

While every resident has been affected by climate harms, participants pointed out that certain groups are especially vulnerable and, while demonstrating resilience, have lower adaptive capacity in the face of climate impacts and harms. People with disabilities have been disproportionately affected, with some losing their lives during the cyclone. Those who survived face difficulties, having lost loved ones as well as carers, struggling to compete for food and relief items during emergencies, and facing ongoing serious challenges with mobility and accessing livelihoods, healthcare and other essentials.[35]

Some participants emphasised that children have been especially affected by climate harms, including to life, loved ones and caregivers, homes, education, food security, and physical and mental health.[36] Many also identified women, and especially girls, as another vulnerable group, as changes in households, livelihoods, and social and cultural dynamics have left many vulnerable to insecurity and exploitation.[37]

The participants' responses show that climate change has impacts well beyond moments of disaster, resulting in long-term harms to individuals and the larger community.[38] These harms require responses that are more holistic than short-term relief and emergency preparedness, which have been the focus of top-down interventions.

Perceptions of Top-Down Climate Reponses

> *"Though we have support from NGOs and the District Council, we don't have enough support to meet the need of all community members. Further to this, organisations come and support when disasters strike and we usually struggle throughout the year in the aftermath of the disasters."* – Community leader, Nkhulambe

Given the devastation extreme weather events and ongoing climate change have caused in Nkhulambe, participants discussed government climate responses and gaps civil society organisations have filled. While acknowledging the value of the support residents have received from these actors, participants argued that official measures have not been adequately contextualised or sustained to address the climate harms they have experienced.

In the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Freddy, participants said, government actors were visibly involved in disaster management and relief efforts. The Malawi Defence Force undertook rescue efforts and helped with the recovery of remains.[39] The Department of Disaster Management Affairs

35 CW; FG3; IN1; IN2; IN4.

36 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3; IN1; IN2; IN4.

37 CW; FG2; FG3; IN2; IN4.

38 See Sophia Brown, "'One Thousand Ways to Experience Loss': Why Acknowledging Non-Economic Loss and Damage Is So Important," *The Loss and Damage Newsletter,* 15 January 2026, https://lossanddamage.substack.com/p/one-thousand-ways-to-experience-loss. On Malawi, see Civil Society Network on Climate Change, *Guidelines for Quantifying Economic and Non-Economic Loss and Damage* (2024); Civil Society Network on Climate Change, *Climate Injustices Experienced by Communities in Blantyre and Neno Districts* (2023).

39 FG2.

(DoDMA) set up temporary camps for displaced residents to ensure safety and essential services. Officials distributed food and basic necessities across the area. Government healthcare workers provided medical care and distributed necessities for ensuring disease prevention, sanitation and access to clean water, with participants sharing the examples of buckets and chlorine tablets.[40]

As residents returned from the camps and time passed, the DoDMA office at the District Council has been tasked with coordinating and overseeing emergency and climate responses in the area. Government and other actors are required to request permission for their activities. The DoDMA office links civil society actors with the relevant government offices and departments, and all actors then operate through working clusters dedicated to specific matters such as shelter, water, food security, protection, and communications, supported by extension workers in the field. In recent years, government officials have coordinated with national and international civil society organisations to establish food-for-work programmes, build a number of houses for displaced residents, repair sections of the community health centre and other infrastructure, and build dykes and other flood-control measures, in addition to organising disaster risk management trainings for community leaders.[41]

At the community level, Area Disaster Risk Management Committees, which are made up of traditional authorities and other community representatives, perform a number of tasks related to disaster management, linking the community and the government. These include providing early warnings to residents based on weather data from the District Council, coordinating residents during disasters and sending them to evacuation centres, raising awareness about disaster management and climate responses, and communicating with a range of actors to organise humanitarian and other support. Community needs are further reported to the District Council through Area Development Committees and the group village head. Participants noted that it is disaster-specific reports that are intended to trigger an investigation and response from the government.[42]

Pushing for legal enforcement from below, traditional authorities responded to community feedback by introducing bylaws to enforce tree planting and environmental conservation in the area.[43] Participants noted that these authorities also introduced bylaws to prevent early marriage and have been active in annulling child marriages that previously took place, in addition to working more informally against other forms of exploitation.[44]

Despite these structures and efforts, participants noted that the government presence in the area decreased substantially over time. Civil society organisations stepped into the gap to some degree. After the cyclone, international organisations and agencies such as World Vision, ActionAid, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the World Food Programme distributed food, medication, clothing and other necessities. Organisations with a more lasting presence, participants pointed out, have been the

40 FG2; FG3; IN4.
41 CW; IN1; IN4.
42 CW; FG3; IN2; IN3.
43 FG2; FG3; IN1.
44 CW.

Malawi Red Cross Society, the Centre for Integrated Community Development, Plan Malawi, and Churches Action in Relief and Development.

The Malawi Red Cross Society has been particularly present, providing training, equipment, mobile phones, airtime and other materials in support of climate-smart agriculture, agroforestry, and community-based climate change and disaster responses. They have also trained community volunteers to provide ongoing mental health and psychosocial support in the area, especially to vulnerable individuals such as people living with disabilities and child-headed households.[45]

Overall, however, participants argued that the vast majority of government and civil society interventions have taken the form of one-off or short-term initiatives – focused when disaster strikes – rather than the sustained support residents require year-round.[46] In light of the multifaceted harms they face, participants called for long-term solutions tailored to residents' needs, including marginalised and vulnerable groups, particularly on the part of the government.

A priority, they said, is better and consistent enforcement of laws relevant to disaster risk management, as well as laws protecting citizens from various forms of exploitation due to climate harms. Another priority is the resettlement of permanently displaced residents, 'build back better' strategies in the area, and adapted housing for vulnerable individuals with low adaptive capacity to climate change, alongside other targeted support for vulnerable groups.[47]

Equally important is the construction and repair of infrastructure across the board, particularly bridges, roads, public buildings, the energy grid, irrigation schemes and water intakes, alongside removal of stones left by floodwaters and the rehabilitation of river systems. This would include building new evacuation centres and emergency housing as part of disaster preparedness.[48] Participants also called for the government to provide equipment and materials for residents to be able to help themselves in case of emergencies, as well as for community-led climate-wise development efforts.[49]

Given the limited government and other support available, however, participants pointed out that residents have developed a range of climate responses of their own in the years since the cyclone.

Emphasis on Bottom-Up Solutions

The community-led climate responses shared by the participants in Nkhulambe draw on residents' intimate knowledge of climate harms, their contextually specific consequences, and the networks and resources available to residents within the community.[50] Importantly, these responses are both forward-looking and backwards-looking. Disaster preparedness and climate readiness measures serve

45 FG2; FG3; IN3; IN4.
46 FG1; FG2; FG3; IN2.
47 CW; FG3.
48 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3; IN1.
49 CW.
50 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3.

to create a community environment where climate harms are less likely to occur, while truth telling and memorialisation acknowledge the depth of past climate harms, honour what was lost, and encourage learning and mobilisation around climate change. In this, they reflect transitional justice practices.

Climate Readiness

> *"We put in place measures to restore the environment. We have bylaws for people not to be destroying trees and for them to be planting trees. We are also making check dams to protect ourselves from the floodwaters."* – Community leader, Nkhulambe

Regarding climate readiness, participants discussed the emergency preparedness, reforestation, climate-resilient agriculture and housing, and mutual support measures that residents have put in place.

Participants noted that residents have established early warning systems across their communities. They have also formed local 'resilience groups' focused on preparedness and climate adaptation, which include people living with disabilities and other vulnerable individuals.[51]

Moreover, residents have raised awareness of the need to protect against deforestation and focused on planting trees and vetiver grass around homesteads, along riverbanks, and by graveyards to reduce the impact of floods, including by propagating and distributing seedlings.[52]

They have worked to cultivate crops that can grow amid the changes in weather patterns and in sandy soil, such as sugarcane and cassava, in addition to constructing irrigation systems and using organic fertiliser.[53] When possible, they have relocated homes and enterprises to higher ground, with stronger foundations, and helped make check dams to protect against flood damage.

Among themselves, residents have taken concrete steps to ensure mutual support. According to participants, they have established Village Savings and Loans Associations to increase their economic resilience in the face of climate harms. They have engaged in *chipeleganyu,* or community groups that informally pool their savings and support each other financially according to need.[54]

Residents have housed neighbours and family members displaced by the cyclone, and in some cases helped each other physically and financially rebuild or repair houses. Individually or through traditional authorities and churches, and at times local businesses, many have provided vulnerable community members with food, clothing and other necessities. Residents have also provided each other with quiet emotional support.[55]

51 CW; FG2; IN3.
52 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3.
53 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3.
54 FG1; FG2.
55 CW; FG2; FG3.

Truth Telling

> *"We need to tell our stories so that other communities can learn from our experiences."* – Participant, focus group discussion

To acknowledge and raise awareness of climate harms, Nkhulambe residents regularly engage in truth telling. Usually conducted by a state-run or civil society-led truth commission, truth telling is a core component of transitional justice which enables people affected by (and complicit in) past harms to provide statements on what they experienced, within the parameters of specific types of violations committed during a particular time period. By generating a shared understanding of the past, truth telling makes harms easier to grasp and prevent, and harder to deny.[56] A transformative approach would not constrain the types of harms or the period participants can talk about, while using formats that allow more contextually relevant truth-telling methods than states' typically quasi-judicial processes allow. Addressing past injustices and their links to ongoing inequalities, it would foreground not only participants' experiences of harm as victims and survivors, but also their solutions as active citizens.

Reflecting on truth telling, participants noted that Area Disaster Risk Management Committee meetings have proven to be platforms for residents to give extended and recorded statements on their experiences of multifaceted climate harms, the causes and enabling factors they perceive, and the solutions they recommend. Participants also pointed to traditional cultural events and church meetings, as well as ceremonies such as funerals, as spaces in which residents engage in truth telling with larger groups about the climate harms they and the community more broadly have suffered.[57] In addition, some residents have organised informal groups that meet regularly to create dedicated space for the sharing of experiences of harms and trauma, some of which include a special 'children's corner' for this vulnerable group.[58] To reach audiences beyond their community, residents conduct truth telling with external stakeholders, such as journalists and civil society organisations that can document and disseminate their statements to a large audience, as well as healthcare and other government actors collecting data.[59]

Participants were clear about the value and need for truth telling within and beyond the community. They emphasised that truth telling helps residents share the emotional burden of their experiences and begin the process of healing from trauma. Moreover, truth telling about what happened, and to whom, raises awareness of the wide range of climate harms in the area, capturing the scale of the challenges residents face. It also facilitates learning from the past among children, youth, and the wider community, while helping attract increased and more tailored and informed external support.[60] Importantly, participants said, truth telling enables residents to share not only experiences of

56 Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010); Jamie Rowen, *Searching for Truth in the Transitional Justice Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Paul Ugor and Bonny Ibhawoh, eds., *Narrating Transitional Justice: Memory in the Age of Truth and Reconciliation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025).

57 FG2; FG3.

58 CW.

59 FG3.

60 FG2; FG3; IN1.

climate harms – and the marginalisation and vulnerability that exacerbate these harms – but also the solutions they have developed. This local knowledge can help national and international audiences acknowledge past climate harms in their fullness, as well as recognise how prevailing power imbalances keep affected communities in a passive role and prevent essential lessons learnt on the ground from improving global climate responses.[61]

Memorialisation

> *"A memorial is important for the new generations and for not forgetting. It would be necessary to have one for the cyclone. It is important for the community and the families to know what happened and to whom."* – Participant, focus group discussion

To honour those lost, remember past harms, begin the healing process, and shape the way climate harms are talked about in the public sphere, participants highlighted the value of memorialisation efforts. A type of symbolic redress and reparation in transitional justice, memorialisation via an event, a public space, or a physical object enables public acknowledgement of the harms done, their consequences for victims and survivors (as well as larger society), and the urgency of preventing such harms.[62] A transformative transitional justice approach to memorialisation would be initiated and designed by the people affected by harms themselves.

Reflecting on group initiatives, participants noted that residents have used traditional practices for memorialisation, pointing to the example of *Mulhako wa Alhomwe,* a cultural festival of the Lhomwe people, which has included prayers for those who lost their lives due to climate impacts as well as appeasement rituals for ancestors.[63] Religious occasions have also provided memorialisation spaces, with church leaders and members organising prayers, special services, and candle-lighting ceremonies to commemorate the lives lost. Many churches hold annual commemorations related to Cyclone Freddy.[64] Participants noted that these backwards-looking traditional and religious practices often include a forward-looking component, focused on learning from past climate harms and mobilising residents to organise and support each other to prevent or mitigate them in the future.

Participants also remarked that residents have gathered within areas and families to remember what was lost and encourage each other amid the pain and trauma they are facing. The unveiling and annual cleaning of tombstones of climate victims often provides an occasion for this informal type of memorialisation. Some families, participants noted, hold memorial rituals every year, which entail abstaining from work or eating meat.[65]

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61 FG1; FG2; FG3; IN4.

62 Pablo de Greiff, ed., *The Handbook of Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, *From Memory to Action: A Toolkit for Memorialization in Post-Conflict Societies* (2012); Mina Rauschenbach, Julia Viebach and Stephan Parmentier, eds., *Localising Memory in Transitional Justice: The Dynamics and Informal Practices of Memorialisation after Mass Violence and Dictatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

63 FG2; FG3.

64 FG2; FG3; IN4.

65 FG1; FG2; FG3; IN4.

Many participants emphasised the value of building a physical memorial for climate harms. Some were aware of the memorial pillar installed in Phalombe to honour the hundreds of lives lost in a massive rockslide caused by flooding in 1991.[66] The traditional authority in one area of Nkhulambe noted that residents had discussed gathering funds to erect a similar memorial for victims of Cyclone Freddy.[67] Participants reflected that a public memorial in Nkhulambe would help formalise the memorialisation processes already occurring throughout the area and provide a joint physical space for commemoration.

Moreover, participants asserted that memorialisation events and spaces are important for individual, family and collective healing, especially in areas like theirs that do not have much in the way of mental health and psychosocial support services. They help people feel less alone and share the burden of the many climate harms they have experienced and continue to live with daily, creating occasions where talking about trauma and pain is acceptable and shame-free.[68] As one participant said, "A shared problem is half-solved."[69] In this sense, residents' memorialisation practices overlap with their truth-telling measures.

Finally, participants argued that memorialisation enables those most affected by climate harms to shape the way those harms are discussed and addressed. They offer opportunities for educational activities aimed at children and youth as well as the broader community – learning what happened and the actors and conditions that enabled it, as well as collective efforts to identify, share and undertake climate responses within the community. In addition, they provide a learning opportunity for external actors, including the government and civil society, as well as international actors, who may have influence on global climate change debates and actions.[70]

Value of Participatory Reforms and Climate Responses

> *"We are not consulted to input into the formulation of disaster management policies at national and district level. I remember as chiefs we were once called to be oriented on the disaster-related policies at the District Council. We believe that if they can be giving the communities, who have suffered a great deal, a chance to explain their experiences and tell their stories, the policies would be aligned to the local challenges and needs."* – Community leader, Nkhulambe

Given the breadth of residents' experiences of climate harms within Nkhulambe and the range of forward-looking and backwards-looking measures they have developed to address them (especially as the summary of solutions in this report is not exhaustive), participants argued that effective

66 FG2; FG3. See MBC Digital, "Phalombe Disaster: 31 Years Later," Facebook post, 10 March 2022, https://www.facebook.com/mbctv.malawi/posts/phalombe-disaster-31-years-lateron-sunday-10-march-1991-floods-hit-phalombe-dist/4217791328323293/

67 FG1.

68 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3.

69 FG3.

70 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3.

climate responses should be based on the knowledge and solutions of those most affected.[71] From a transformative transitional justice perspective, this means valorising bottom-up measures in themselves, as well as mobilising them to improve top-down measures, while enabling an institutional environment that curbs further climate harms.

To be clear, members of the community are doing a great deal on the ground, and continually working to raise awareness and organise more residents to join in climate actions. Participants emphasised the stand-alone value of these local efforts. They called for the government and external actors to provide material support so that residents can scale up the existing initiatives within Nkhulambe.

Moreover, participants asserted that residents' initiatives can strengthen top-down climate responses at the national level. These initiatives demonstrate the full range of climate harms that need to be addressed, which may not even be visible to government and climate experts, especially those focusing on disaster management. The initiatives are contextually rooted, drawing on community knowledge, resources and networks that can improve government efforts, help identify and remove barriers to effectiveness, and take into account structural marginalisation and vulnerability.

They also bring together a broad range of actors, including neighbourhood and women's groups, people living with disabilities, youth and children, traditional authorities, religious leaders, government workers, and representatives of civil society organisations, among others. If they saw the community's realities reflected in top-down climate responses like they are in bottom-up efforts, participants asserted, residents would invest more in them.[72]

Not only that, but participants also argued that top-down efforts often fail without bottom-up initiatives. They noted that residents have been given supplies and support they do not need, for example receiving buckets during an emergency when they urgently needed food, or bicycles for community activities that became unusable because they had components that are unavailable and unrepairable in the local area. Residents end up discarding or selling materials and not attending activities that they know are irrelevant to their situation, which participants see as a terrible waste given the extent of the need in Nkhulambe.[73] In addition, top-down support often does not reach those who need it most, as government actors do not work enough with the community to identify the most vulnerable residents for targeted support.[74]

> *"Communities are experts, they are not passive, so we should not put them in a passive position and impose interventions on them with no feedback. They should be at the centre of planning, implementation and evaluation."* – Civil society representative, Phalombe

71 CW; FG1; FG2; FG3; IN1; IN2; IN3; IN4.

72 CW; FG1; IN4.

73 FG2; FG3; IN4.

74 CW; FG3.

In this regard, participants advocated for a more participatory approach to designing and implementing climate responses in Malawi.[75] Rather than simply passing messages from residents to district and other government officials via community structures or being summoned to occasional community consultations, participants called for local councils to work with residents to establish new mechanisms for regular, consistent engagement with government officials. They called for two-way, direct conversation and decision making, including through community members affected by climate impacts serving in leadership positions on government bodies dealing with climate change.[76]

Furthermore, participants suggested better data collection by the government, for example in the form of questionnaires and focus group discussions, within communities affected by climate change, to gain a more holistic and inclusive picture of climate harms and solutions. They also called for a complaints and feedback system, even if only in the form of physical boxes set up across the area or a toll-free number.[77] One interviewee gave the example of a civil society organisation that requested feedback from community members and adapted its approach to allow for multi-purpose cash transfers that enabled agency, instead of restricted cash transfers targeted to food or educational supplies. This interviewee stressed that the people who face the hardships of climate harms every day know best how to respond to them.[78]

Given that the government is still in the process of reviewing and formulating its climate policies and laws, participants emphasised that people most affected by climate change must actively participate in the process. When discussing national-level responsibility, participants focused not on prosecutions and other retributive forms of accountability (for now), but rather on participatory institutional and procedural reforms that would facilitate more holistic climate responses. With these reforms, government frameworks would be better aligned with local needs and solutions, and have more likelihood of buy-in and success in the long term.[79] Moreover, the Malawian government's inputs and actions as part of the global climate regime would be more in line with affected communities' understandings of and approaches to climate justice. Participants see this as an opportunity for the country to come together to address climate change.

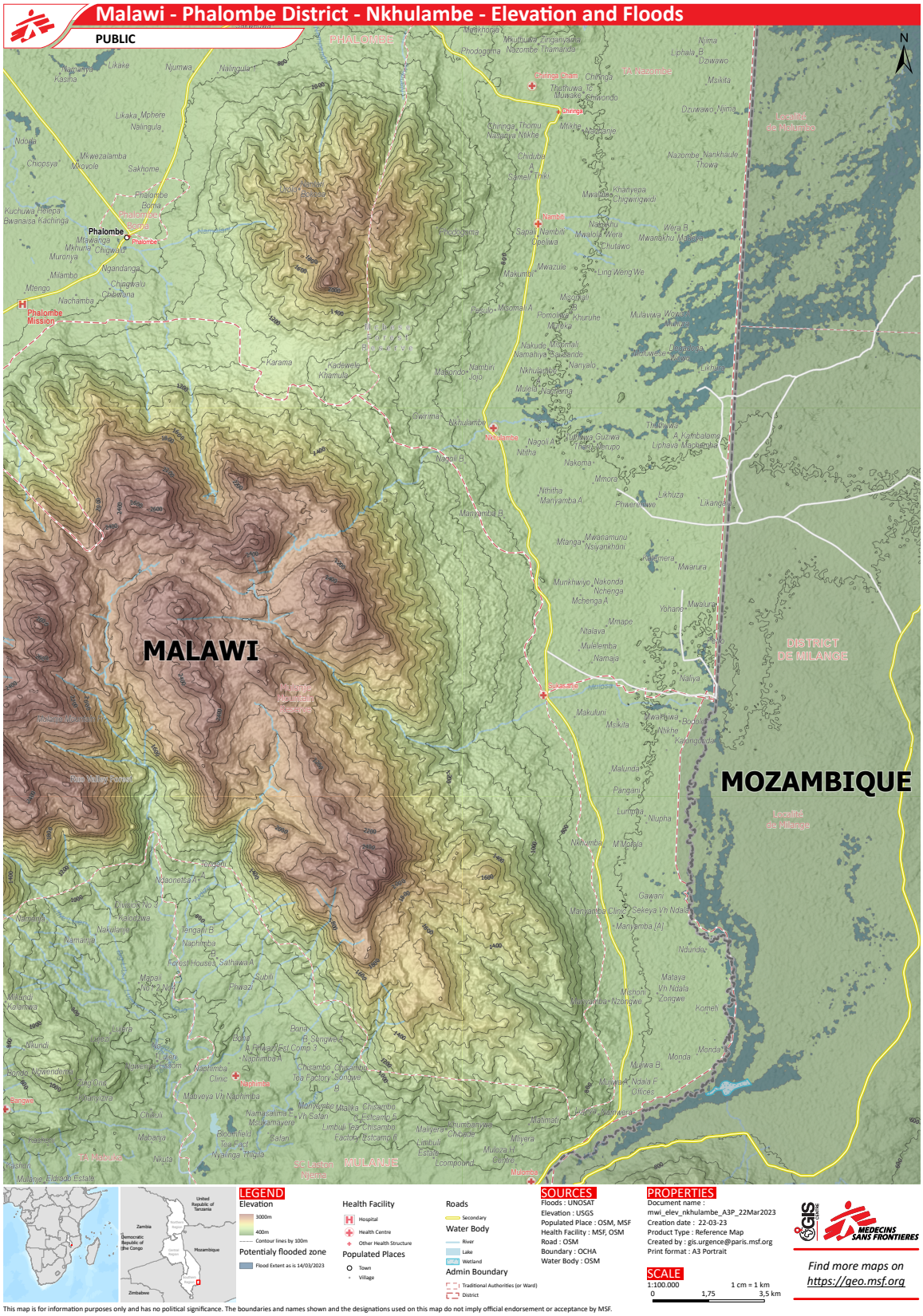
Looking at international actors – including the governments and corporations that have contributed most to historical and ongoing carbon emissions – participants highlighted that these actors have a lot to learn from affected communities, in terms of the extent of the harms climate impacts cause as well as knowledge that would strengthen global climate responses. Given the resources at their disposal, these actors can provide support for scaling up community-led approaches and linking them with global climate responses.[80] Participants see this as an opportunity for international actors, but also as a responsibility and obligation on their part.

75 For information on mainstreaming participation in transitional justice processes, see Brankovic and Robins, 2025.
76 FG1; IN4.
77 CW; FG1; IN4.
78 IN4.
79 FG1; IN1; IN3; IN4.
80 FG2; FG3.

Conclusion

By applying a transformative transitional justice lens to the climate impacts and responses in Nkhulambe, this report shows that residents have used their deep knowledge of the multifaceted climate harms in their area to develop forward- and backwards-looking measures – not previously documented together – which help promote justice in the climate transition. Both as stand-alone measures and as potential contributors to top-down efforts, these bottom-up truth-telling, memorialisation, and institutional reform initiatives call for additional research and attention.

The case of Nkhulambe indicates the synergies between transitional justice and climate justice. It represents an 'out of the box' way to understand and address climate harms which occurred in the past, while building solidarity in the present, in order to curb the harms of future climate impacts. As an internationally accepted field, transitional justice opens new pathways to contextually responsive and more transformative climate action, with measures that can connect the solutions of affected communities with national and global efforts.



SOURCE: MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

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