

Key points

The CJC model of blending integrated rural development with a market systems approach through pre-existing community structures delivered measurable and sustainable climate resilience gains in Malawi.

Village savings and loans associations were the most consistently effective and equity-producing mechanism, driving women's financial inclusion, asset accumulation and economic independence.

The project strongly aligns with the principles for locally led adaptation, devolving decision making through community-led structures, investing in local capabilities and providing patient, predictable funding — offering a replicable model for climate justice programming in other vulnerable contexts.

Three-year project cycles are insufficient for institutional embedding and sustainability. Donors and programme designers should adopt a minimum five-year implementation period with a built-in transition phase.

Lessons from supporting climate justice in Malawi

Malawi's smallholder farming communities face escalating climate shocks, due mainly to their high sensitivity to climate impacts and low adaptive capacity. The three-year Climate Just Communities (CJC) Malawi project addressed community needs through a hybrid model that combined integrated rural development for climate resilience with a market systems approach. This briefing presents the main findings from the project's endline evaluation, which found that the CJC project generated many improved outcomes, including increased organic fertiliser adoption, improved annual maize yield through better irrigation, and greater women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion due to village savings and loans associations. Climate shock exposure among project households also fell measurably. Key recommendations include extending project cycles to five years, prioritising depth over breadth in implementation and strengthening shock-proofing and livelihood risk reduction measures.

Malawi is one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world. It ranks seventh on the German Watch Climate Risk Index and among the lowest on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative Index for climate readiness.^{1,2} Recurrent floods, prolonged dry spells and cyclones devastate rural livelihoods, with smallholder farming households bearing the greatest burden.³ Over 80% of Malawi's population depends on rain-fed agriculture, yet adaptive capacity remains severely constrained by poverty, limited infrastructure and weak institutional support.⁴

From 2023 to 2026, the CJC Malawi project, funded by the Scottish government and implemented by DAI Global UK and local delivery partners, worked with existing community-led structures across seven districts — Chikwawa, Karonga, Machinga, Neno, Phalombe, Salima and Zomba — to improve climate justice and food and

income security for smallholder farming households.⁵ Blending rural development for climate resilience and a market systems approach, the project delivered integrated interventions across four thematic pillars: disaster risk management (DRM); livelihoods security; resilient schools; and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), with gender equality, locally led adaptation (LLA), and loss and damage as cross-cutting priorities.

This briefing presents findings from the endline evaluation of CJC Malawi, completed in 2026 using household surveys, focus group discussions and key informant interviews across all seven implementation districts. The evaluation used community voices to assess outcomes against each thematic pillar, examined cross-cutting gender, LLA, and loss and damage dimensions, and identified the enabling and

constraining conditions shaping implementation and sustainability. It also assessed the project's alignment with the eight principles for locally led adaptation.⁶ The briefing concludes with policy recommendations for future programming.

CJC delivery model

The CJC model broadly prioritises climate action for communities facing the greatest climate risks, guided by principles of fairness, social inclusion and human rights, and an operational ethos of participation, community ownership and individual agency.

Based on iterative learning, CJC applies a hybrid model that blends integrated rural development with a market systems approach (see Figure 1). The smallholder farming household is the focus, supported by market systems and a broader enabling environment of aligned policies on climate adaptation, natural resource management, DRM, water and financial inclusion. This systems approach ensures interventions are not delivered in isolation. Four thematic pillars — DRM, WASH, resilient schools and livelihoods security — are used to deliver the climate resilience and market systems hybrid model.

Rather than creating parallel institutions or working directly with households, the project channelled resources to improve income and food security and climate justice through

pre-existing community-led structures — for example, village DRM committees (VDRMCs), village natural resource management committees (VNRMCs), farmer clubs and village savings and loans associations (VSLAs). These structures offer established legitimacy, avoid the cost of building new institutions, and direct resources to women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

Summary of findings

Theme 1: DRM

The project delivered an integrated package of DRM measures designed to address the consistent drought, flooding and land degradation experienced across the target districts, with the interventions delivered through pre-existing VDRMCs and VNRMCs. Activities centred on tree nursery establishment and forest regeneration, soil and water conservation training, physical infrastructure construction (including check dams, dykes and evacuation centres), bylaw development with financial penalties, and hybrid early warning systems blending Indigenous and technical approaches.

Project beneficiaries reported a decrease in flooding events attributable to tree planting, forest gardens, woodlot establishment and drainage clearance. Further, the construction of evacuation centres improved post-shock safety, while trees provided physical protection for households. Finally, better coordination emerged between VDRMCs, VNRMCs, area development committees and village development committees.

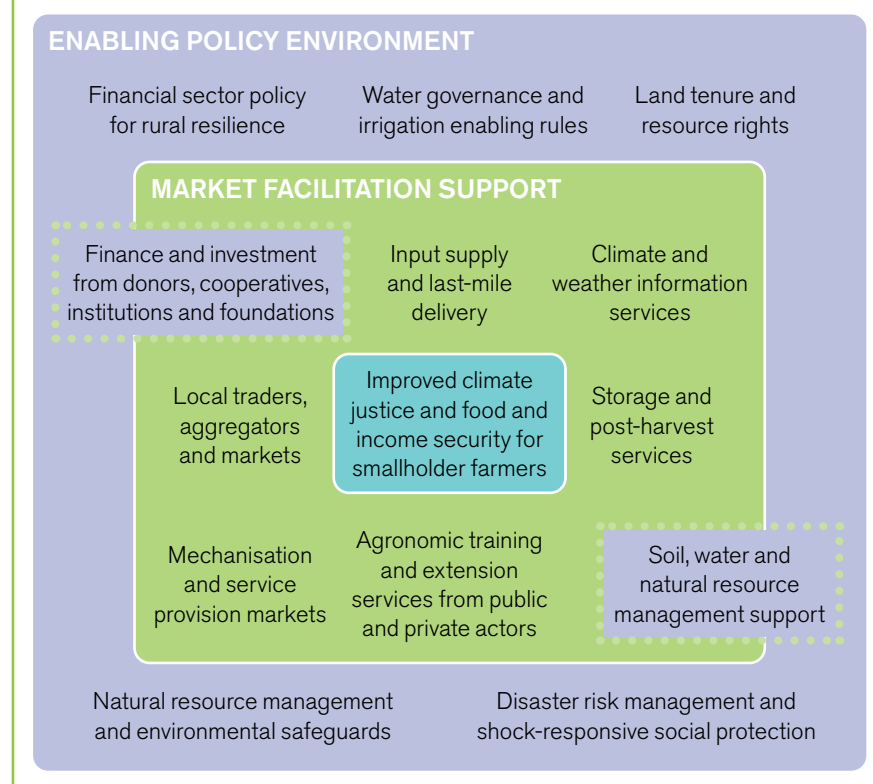
Household survey data corroborated these qualitative accounts, showing that climate shock exposure among project households fell over the evaluation period, supporting greater stability in production, productivity and food security. One notable and consistent positive finding was the increase in women serving as decision-making participants and leaders within DRM structures.

Theme 2: livelihoods security

Livelihoods interventions addressed the structural poverty of CJC's predominantly smallholder farming beneficiaries, the vast majority of whom have no formal employment and rely on maize for both their food and income. The project worked through farmer clubs, irrigation clubs, livestock clubs, beekeeping clubs and VSLAs, delivering conservation agriculture training, irrigation support, small ruminant livestock pass-on schemes and beekeeping value chains.

The impact on livelihoods was substantial. Organic fertiliser usage among project households rose from 29% at baseline to 74% at endline, with consequent benefits for soil health

Figure 1. The CJC framework: a hybrid integrated rural development for climate resilience with market systems model



and reduced dependence on inorganic farming inputs. Focus group participants reported a more than doubling of maize production in some communities from the introduction of related technologies. Irrigation technology was most impactful, enabling smallholder households to harvest two or three times annually instead of only once, while also diversifying crop production beyond maize and beans to include crops such as rice, sweet potatoes and cassava. Some farmers reported yields increasing from fewer than 20 bags per year to 40–60 bags.

VSLAs emerged as the most consistently effective mechanism across the evaluation. They delivered financial inclusion, women's economic empowerment, asset accumulation and a reported shift in mindsets from dependency to self-reliance. Women's income was reported as increasing markedly, and VSLA membership broadened over the implementation period, particularly for women. Connected vocational skills training in areas such as bricklaying, tailoring and business management further extended livelihood options.

Theme 3: resilient schools

The project established DRM clubs in schools and delivered a package of resilient infrastructure, climate change and emergency response training, safety protocols, and contextualised guidelines on DRM, resilient schools and gender equality.

Beneficiaries reported active DRM clubs with engaged student leadership, a shift in mindsets connecting climate change to everyday safety, reduced disaster-related absenteeism, and students replicating skills such as vegetable gardening at home. Gender equity and disability inclusion were normalised within DRM clubs.

Students identified murals as an area of significant change, suggesting visual and experiential methods are more memorable than formal training. However, inadequate training depth and aging infrastructure remain weaknesses.

Theme 4: WASH

WASH interventions centred on drilling or rehabilitating boreholes, complemented by widespread training in borehole management, hygiene, sanitation and climate resilience. All focus group discussions consistently linked borehole access to reduced waterborne disease, shorter water collection times, increased school attendance and more time for productive activity. In Chikwawa, one community received a rehabilitated borehole with a solar-powered pump, solar panels, water tanks and ten taps serving hundreds of households.

A promising sustainability-related finding was the emergence of community financial ownership through water management committees (WMCs) collecting small user fees for maintenance and repairs. In several sites, this was complemented by VSLA-linked 'borehole banking', providing credit at lower interest rates than informal lenders. This model represents a shift from dependency to ownership. However, the demand for services and infrastructure far exceeded the budget for the project. This meant that allocation was uneven in a few communities.

Cross-cutting priorities

Gender and disability inclusion: gender equality improved across all thematic areas. Women were trained to take on roles traditionally associated with men, including technical repair of boreholes and irrigation equipment, lead farmer roles, tree planting and natural resource management. Women increasingly led VSLAs and occupied leadership positions within VNRMCS and WMCs. Multiple focus groups reported a perceived reduction in gender-based violence linked to improved understanding of gender dynamics.

WASH interventions were explicitly framed as gender interventions, with reduced water collection distances freeing women and girls from unpaid domestic labour and enabling engagement in productive activity and education. People with disabilities were actively included in school DRM clubs.

Locally led adaptation: the evaluation found strong alignment between the CJC project and LLA principles, with demonstrable evidence of devolved decision making through community-led structures; the provision of patient and predictable funding through an iterative multi-phase approach; investment in local capabilities through training and skills development; improved understanding of climate risk by combining local knowledge with formal climate information; and flexible programming through participatory tools. Quarterly learning exchanges between local delivery partners and cross-district exchange visits further embedded adaptive management.

Enabling and constraining conditions

The partnership model and use of pre-existing community structures were the primary enabling conditions, fostering ownership and sustainability, legitimacy and broad buy-in from traditional authorities and district governments. Further, the market systems approach, though nascent, showed promise, with the VITALITE solar partnership achieving near-universal solar

adoption in project areas through VSLA-linked distribution.

However, the evaluation identified a consistent trade-off between breadth and depth: geographic coverage sometimes exceeded operational and budget capacity, leaving affected areas uncovered. Further, the three-year project cycle was widely regarded as insufficient, with multiple stakeholders recommending a minimum of five years.

Other constraints included insufficient training depth, reliance on overstretched government extension services, volunteer dropout when unpaid, limited market systems facilitation capacity among local delivery partners, and affordability barriers preventing uptake of higher-value productive-use solar technology.

Box 1. Sustainable CJC initiatives

VSLAs: fully self-capitalising savings groups with ability to lend at below market rates; members save, lend, and share profits without external subsidies; 60 committees trained, with members now running businesses and accumulating assets.

Solar energy (VITALITE): commercially viable with sales continuing after the DAI contract expires; basic kits are self-financing.

Youth vocational enterprises: trained youth are economically independent and are absorbed into the skilled labour market; initial training cost needs public investment, but the resulting businesses are self-sustaining.

Beekeeping: revenue-generating from honey sales once hives and equipment are provided; indirectly serves as a forest conservation incentive, reducing reliance on charcoal production and sales as a livelihood option.

Irrigation farming: increased revenue from crop sales covers setup and operations; the capital cost of solar pumps requires initial investment.

Borehole banking/WMC fees: fees cover basic costs of routine maintenance; needs some public backstop and access to district borehole technicians for major repairs.

Policy recommendations

Extend minimum project cycles to five years:

this will support institutional embedding of community structures, behavioural change and sustainability of outcomes such as tree planting and bylaw enforcement.

Prioritise depth over breadth: future programmes should concentrate resources in fewer geographic areas to achieve demonstrable impact before scaling. A hierarchy of delivery should ensure foundational needs — particularly water access — are met before more complex or technology-based interventions. All interventions need suitable incentive structures to ensure outcomes are sustained, whether through VSLA-linked stipends, in-kind benefits or integration into government extension systems.

Budget for at least 12–18 months of post-project monitoring and supervision: delivered through district government structures, this will ensure learning is embedded and foundational to project or programmatic adaptive management.

Incorporate explicit and coordinated shock-proofing measures: this includes crop insurance, climate information systems and livelihood diversification to reduce covariant risk and enable informed seasonal decision making. Local private sector actors providing climate resilient products and services should be engaged in sourcing sustainable solutions.

Strengthen financial inclusion for women and other marginalised groups: access to affordable and secure finance for the most marginalised is key to ensuring access to critical technologies and long-term climate resilience.

Thematic recommendations include pairing conservation training with sustained follow-up, strengthening bylaw enforcement through traditional authority-level accountability, deepening links between VSLAs and markets, replacing briefing-level school training with structured curriculums, ensuring equitable borehole allocation, and scaling up the 'borehole banking' model with standardised financial management tools.

Sam Barrett

Sam Barrett, senior evaluator and lead analyst, IIED



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

Contact

Sam Barrett
sam.barrett@iied.org

44 Southampton Buildings
London, WC2A 1AP
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback
via: www.linkedin.com/company/iied

ISBN: 978-1-83759-218-0

The Climate Just Communities (CJC) project was funded by the Scottish government and implemented by DAI Global UK.

Notes

¹ German Watch (2026) Climate Risk Index 2026: Who Suffers Most from Extreme Events. German Watch, Bonn. / ² ND-GAIN (2024) University of Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative Country Index Technical Report. Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, Notre Dame. / ³ Barrett, S (2013) Local level climate justice: Adaptation finance and vulnerability reduction. *Global Environmental Change*, pp.1819–1829. / ⁴ IFAD (2013) Smallholders, food security, and the environment. IFAD, Rome. / ⁵ DAI (2023) CJC Malawi: Programme Delivery Plan. DAI, London. / ⁶ Soanes, M, Bahadur, A, Shakya, C, Smith, B, Patel, S, Rumbaitis del Rio, C, Cogger, T, Dinshaw, A, Patel, S, Huq, S, Musa, M, Rahman, F, Gupta, S, Dolcemascolo, G and Mann, T (2021) Principles for locally led adaptation: A call to action. IIED, London.

