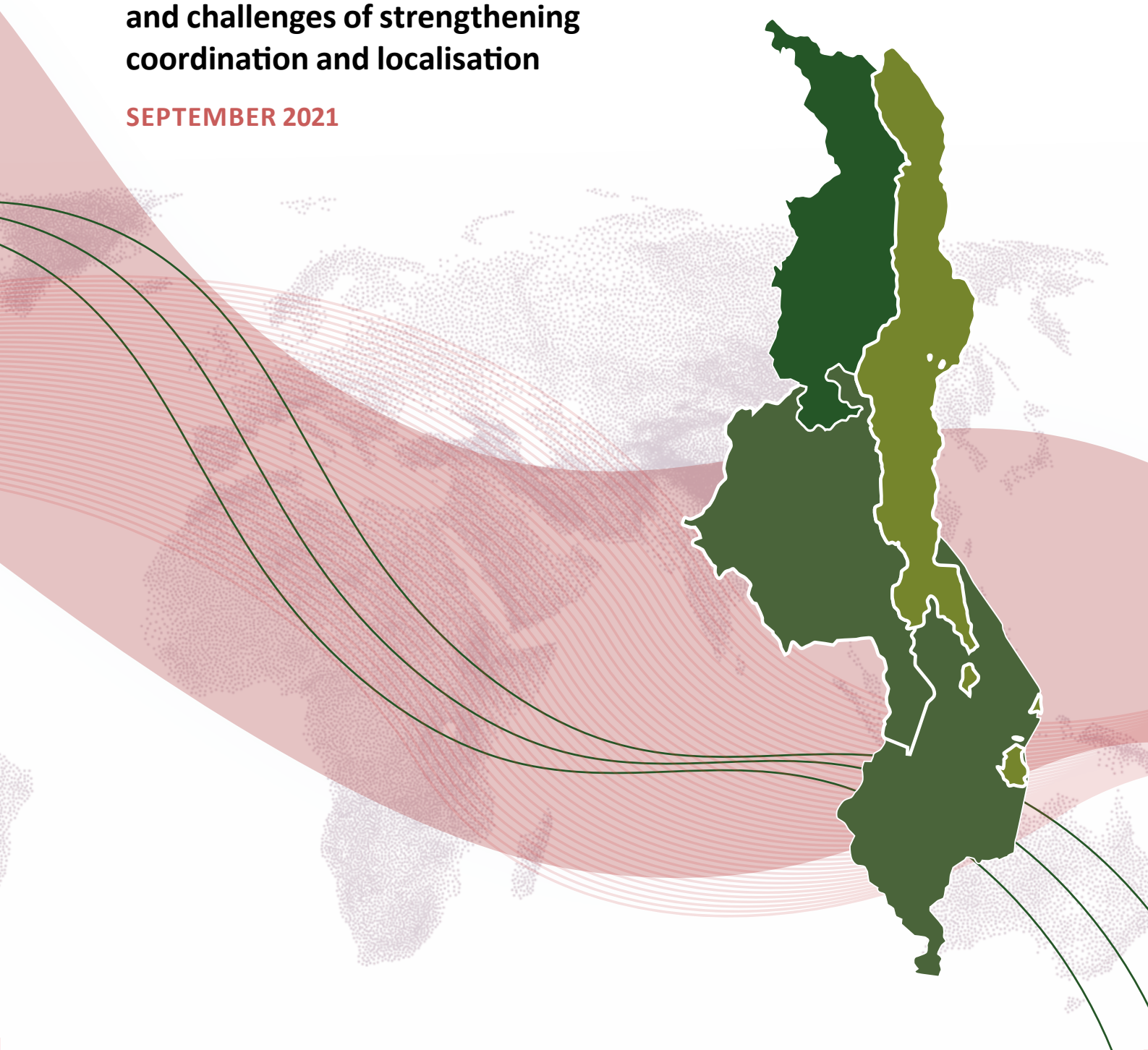


Implementing an Action Plan for Child Protection in Emergencies in Malawi

Case study documenting the successes
and challenges of strengthening
coordination and localisation

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BACKGROUND

Local actors¹ and national organisations in the Global South are often excluded from decision-making mechanisms in international humanitarian responses.² The **Global Child Protection Area of Responsibility's (CP AoR)** Localisation Initiative has committed to implementing the **Grand Bargain**, which aims to shift power and resources into the hands of local actors and improve local capacities in humanitarian response.³ To better understand the experiences of local actors who have engaged with international humanitarian response, the **Care and Protection of Children (CPC) Learning Network** and the CP AoR are documenting several localisation initiatives, highlighting promising practices and lessons learned from approaches to localisation, as well as suggesting alternative methods for those approaches that did not evolve fruitfully.

The localisation initiative explored in this case study is Malawi's Action Plan for Child Protection in Emergencies (CPiE) (referred to as the Action Plan, hereafter) elaborated as part of the joint initiative launched by the CP AoR, the **Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children**, and the **International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC)** in Eastern Africa. A series of trainings were conducted in 2018 that aimed to strengthen leadership and collaboration of local actors and enhance the governments' institutional capacity for coordination of the child protection response in humanitarian settings.

Malawi's investment in protection has been long-standing and in 2009, the cluster system was activated as a way of strengthening coordination of humanitarian response. Of these clusters, as of 2021, the protection one counts 24 active members comprised of representatives from government, United Nations (UN), and international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Protection Cluster⁴ is led by the Ministry of Gender and co-led by a focal person from UNICEF. The Action Plan has been implemented via this cluster system and integrated into existing plans such as the Multi-hazard Contingency Plan spearheaded yearly by the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA). DoDMA is the department responsible for leading emergency response within the Malawian government. Upon the onset of the COVID-19 emergency, DoDMA activated nearly all the emergency response clusters, including the Protection Cluster. Per normal protocol when responding to emergencies, each cluster submitted a COVID-19 response plan to DoDMA to be incorporated into the national response plan and later launched by the government, UN agencies, and NGOs.

The Protection Cluster's COVID-19 response plan was expansive, detailing a number of specific issues to be addressed, the relevant activities and indicators, the timeframe of implementation, and budget allocation. This case study aims to detail how the Malawian authorities' leadership and coordination for CPiE have evolved since the training in 2018 and the subsequent implementation of the Action Plan. The goal of this analysis is to understand how local government officials have meaningfully been integrated as agents of change in preparedness, response, and coordination for CPiE.

THE PROTECTION CLUSTER'S COVID-19 RESPONSE HAD TWO PRIMARY GOALS:



To reduce protection threats for affected populations, and to protect all vulnerable groups from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect during disasters and ensure that human rights are respected.



To mainstream gender and social inclusion in the COVID-19 response and cushion the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on the poor and vulnerable.

1 Local, here, refers to actors originating from the country of focus.

2 See assessment commissioned by the CP AoR and conducted by the CPC Learning Network at Columbia University, *Envisioning the Grand Bargain* (2020). https://www.cpaor.net/CP_AoR_approach_to_localisation

3 CP AoR (2020). Localisation. <https://www.cpaor.net/node/666>

4 In Malawi, the Protection Cluster is involved in all matters concerning vulnerable populations. This includes but is not limited to child protection and gender-based violence. Despite UNICEF leading the Protection Cluster, it is not a child protection specific cluster.

METHODOLOGY

A desk review of relevant documents on the Malawi Action Plan, COVID-19 response plan, and the 2018 training briefs was conducted. Qualitative data were collected from three in-depth interviews with respondents from UNICEF, the Malawi Ministry of Gender, and Save the Children Malawi. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to understand the background, structure, and challenges of implementing child protection in Malawi. Opening questions focused on familiarity with the Malawi Action Plan and the 2018 regional training. Closing questions focused on lessons learned since launching the Action Plan and child protection implementation as it works generally via the cluster system. Participants were asked about their recommendations for increased localisation and coordination moving forward.

FINDINGS

Due to the timing of this analysis, the onset and response to the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case example of the successes and challenges of transitioning leadership to government in coordination of protection activities. Analysis of the written documents and interviews demonstrated that the Malawian government's involvement in protection efforts have increased considerably since 2018 in the following areas: (1) Investment in child protection issues and (2) Coordination and leadership of protection efforts. These increases have been made evident by the strong centralised protection response to COVID-19 in Malawi. While there is evident progress towards localisation through increased coordination at the governmental level, much of the decision making and funding are still in the hands of non-local actors. Lasting challenges preventing localisation of protection include (3) Implementation being largely driven by the UN and international partners and (4) A lack of funding and resources directed to local actors.

Investment in Child Protection

Following the 2018 trainings and subsequent development of the Malawi Action Plan, government investment in protection has increased significantly, as confirmed by the qualitative interviews. The trainings promoted increased consideration of child protection in the emergency response. The Action Plan promoted rapid assessments, trainings across sectors, and the inclusion of protection policies. While it is unclear if child protection has been effectively integrated across all sectors, a representative from the Ministry of Gender shared that there has been evident progress towards mainstreaming protection as a priority issue within Malawi. Child protection issues are stated to be much more heavily considered by governmental actors as compared to the past.

Moreover, there has been increased attention to vulnerable populations in need of protection, such as victims of sexual abuse and gender-based violence. This consideration for vulnerable populations was made evident by the centralised response to increased rates of child marriage in Malawi following the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ This became a priority topic for the Protection Cluster and required interagency coordination to address. The Protection Cluster responded to this issue by creating a specific response plan to address child marriages and teen pregnancies and took this plan to the humanitarian country team to appeal for funding from the government and support from non-governmental actors. The increased investment in this issue has resulted in the Malawian government partially funding the response by allocating over 200,000 USD. The funding supported two major areas: activities to reduce child marriages and the improvement of data systems to monitor child marriages. This is an accomplishment that was stated to be quite rare and a major testament to the increased government investment in child protection issues.

Coordination & Leadership of Child Protection

One goal of the Action Plan was to promote increased coordination, which was largely praised as an accomplishment by the interviewees. The Action Plan, and the contingency plan mentioned previously, prompted changes in child protection coordination that trickled down to the district level.

⁵ For more information on the response to increased rates of child marriage, see the Government of Malawi's [Ending Child Marriage: A Call to Action](#) and the Protection Cluster's [Covid-19 Threatens Future of Malawian Adolescent Girls](#).

"In 2018, when the localisation Action Plan came in, we saw a lot of changes. For example, the efforts to strengthen coordination at both the national and district levels. Also, some trainings trickled down to encourage the use of harmonised standards, such as the INSPIRE package when we are fighting violence against children."

The COVID-19 response was considered to be well-coordinated by all the stakeholders interviewed. Virtual meetings were praised as a "blessing in disguise", as they allowed for increased participation from actors across multiple sectors. Such high-level coordination was in stark contrast to the years prior to Action Plan implementation. In 2015, coordination was not nearly as strong; extreme flooding in Malawi generated a less organised response and resulted in a disruption of systems.

As previously mentioned, child marriage became a priority issue during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to the evident increase in government investment, the Malawian government took a strong lead in coordinating the response. Coordination of this issue required the development of a monitoring system that was mainstreamed across many sectors, including the police and social services. This strong interagency coordination has helped to ensure that child protection implementation efforts were distributed across many districts in Malawi. Despite this being an improvement as compared to years prior, interviews revealed that child protection may not be mainstreamed across all sectors and implementation partners have not been identified in some districts. Additionally, some capacity gaps remain in areas such as disability and children in conflict with the law.

"I think it's only in four districts (out of 28) that we don't have any implementing partners, which means that our protection interventions have almost reached all the districts in the country, this is because of the availability of partners."

Another way in which coordination has improved is the adoption of a systematic approach to executing protection activities. The government works closely with implementation partners in the districts who in turn work closely with the communities. The Protection Cluster sets the agenda for issues that need to be prioritised and how they should be addressed and then distributes these plans to the implementation partners. This process has also been strengthened through the development of monitoring systems.

"Say our [the Protection Cluster's] budget is 2 million dollars, that money would not go to UNICEF or any single organisation. Instead, organisations would be implementing [the activities] as part of their implementation plan, and they would develop a tracking matrix where we would agree on indicators and as the Cluster colleague we'd then be following up on those indicators."

The government's initiative to map and manage the Malawian border was cited as an example of the benefits of increased monitoring and coordination. Protection was prioritised in this intervention by staffing the borders with protection workers to ensure that children crossing the Malawian border are documented and accompanied by a guardian.

"In districts, which are in bordering areas with Mozambique, we have a lot of uncharted routes, where people cross countries without using the formal borders. In those areas, it was difficult to monitor what is happening, but with this coordination, it helped a lot to have the stakeholders, even the government stakeholders, actually supporting them with logistical arrangements and to actually monitor uncharted routes and see who is going out and who is coming in and then formalise."

Child Protection Implementation

While there is progress towards localisation through increased investment, coordination, and leadership at the governmental level, the Protection Cluster is still reliant on international implementation partners to lead most of their protection activities. Local NGOs' involvement in the Protection Cluster remains quite limited. Despite cluster membership being open to all, national NGOs only hold four (4) of the twenty-four (24) active seats. At the implementation level, international NGOs lead most of the planned cluster initiatives partnering with local organisations to implement. In all cases, organisational involvement is sought out by the Ministry of Gender and the Protection Cluster to fill resource gaps.

"If there is a child protection case, the social welfare officer might not have the resources to respond. Resources in terms of fuel, the vehicle, and manpower to go and reach out to a victim of violence. Through the networks at district level, they're able to ask partners. Defined partners would come in, they would contribute fuel, they would contribute vehicle or personnel, and then they are able to reach out to victims of violence. That's how things work here."

All stakeholders interviewed stated that despite the implementation being facilitated by international partners, the government is at the forefront of all the protection efforts. The government, both at the national and district levels, takes the lead on child protection response planning, policy guidance, and uses its coordination systems to mobilise implementation partners to implement their plans.

"The role of government is always key. NGOs can't just start implementing activities without involving the government, and the idea is that everyone is using the government systems."

Funding & Resources

One reason why the implementation of child protection activities is not in the hands of local actors is the lack of funding available for their protection efforts. This was cited as one of the biggest challenges to localisation by all the stakeholders interviewed. When looking at the national budget, only five percent is committed to the Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Affairs for Child Protection.

"Economically, of course, the major challenge for the implementation of the plan are always resources. Protection is one of the least funded clusters when it comes to resource mobilisation."

Governmental resources are generally quite limited across all sectors; with the limited funding prioritised for education and health. This obstacle has been remedied by the UN and international NGOs filling in the gaps.

"The issue of funding has been a problem for a long time but with the NGOs and other agencies coming in, they've complemented government funding in humanitarian emergencies."

The Protection Cluster, as all the clusters within the Malawi emergency response network, appeals for funding via its response plan. Analysis of the written documentation on the COVID-19 response plan exemplifies the lack of governmental funding as compared to international funding for protection activities. This is especially true when looking at the sources of funding for disaster management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to strengthen localisation efforts within Malawi fall in the following categories: (1) Shift power and resources to local actors; (2) Address capacity gaps and strengthen community-based mechanisms; (3) Increase child participation; and (4) Increase country-specific support.

Shift Power & Resources to Local Actors

At the forefront of these recommendations is the need to shift power and resources to local actors. Currently, national NGOs hold a minor role in the Protection Cluster with most of the seats going to representatives from the UN and international NGOs. Additionally, the model of community organisations working under international NGOs should be reevaluated. This structure fosters a power dynamic that prioritises the goals of the international community over local ideas and initiatives. Moreover, for localisation efforts to be fully realised, funding and resources should be shifted to local actors whenever possible. The following recommendations could be considered as mechanisms for shifting power:⁶

⁶ The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) promotes the strengthening of civil society in West Africa through knowledge sharing, learning, connecting, and influencing. The WACSI, held a webinar in late 2021 that presents key findings from the research on [Localisation Agenda, Shift the Power and African philanthropic Models](#). Some of the recommendations are informed by this research.

1. The international donor community should earmark larger amounts of funds directly for local organisations and initiatives. When appropriate, international NGOs could consider using international resources to support the work of local organisations.
2. The international community should provide opportunities for local actors to discuss their operational capacity needs and exchange ideas on how these needs could be met.⁷
 - The international community should set aside funds for the institutional capacity building of local organisations, in addition to funds for program implementation.
3. In Malawi, international NGOs could apply for status as local NGOs. International NGOs should consider leaving space for national organisations to apply for local funding opportunities, even when they may have the status that allows them to apply for such opportunities.
4. The Protection Cluster should review its membership to promote the involvement and leadership of local actors.⁸
 - Define and agree on clear definitions for organisational classifications within the cluster. It is important to ensure that the various international NGOs are not considered national NGOs at the cluster level.
 - Set aside seats for local actors in the Protection Cluster. Promote the involvement of national NGOs, community-based organisations, and governmental representatives.
5. The international community must commit to respecting local voices and including them at all levels of the decision-making process.
 - International programs that local NGOs implement should be designed in partnership with local NGOs, and not prefabricated by the international community to be implemented by local actors.
 - Mindfulness of the language used when speaking about national actors is critical. Language asserting that local organisations “do not have the capacity” perpetuates power imbalances.
 - As trust is the key currency and driver of success in localisation efforts, trust between governmental actors, international actors, and local actors must be built.

Address Capacity Gaps & Strengthen Community-Based Mechanisms

While stakeholders emphasised that the government has made progress in addressing child protection capacity gaps, some geographic and thematic gaps remain. Vulnerable populations such as children with disabilities and those in conflict with the law do not have comprehensive programming across all districts. Strengthening community-based mechanisms and supporting the linkage between community and national mechanisms would help fill capacity gaps and ensure sustainability of child protection efforts. The following recommendations could be considered to address capacity gaps and assist in strengthening community-based mechanisms:

1. In districts where implementation partners have not been identified, form partnerships with existing community organisations to fill the geographical gaps and streamline protection activities across all 28 districts.
2. Conduct a mapping of the initiatives implemented in the districts to ensure that there are no thematic gaps in child protection focus areas such as children with disabilities. If a needs assessment is required, consider including children’s voices when conducting assessments.
3. Involve community groups in protection activities and provide a platform for community-based organisations to bring their knowledge to the national level and better inform protection efforts.
4. Strengthen the linkage between formal and informal (e.g., Community Child Protection Committees, Community Victim Support Unit, etc.) structures within Malawi by mapping community services and stakeholders, strengthening referral systems, and improving data collection and management at the community level. Ensure that monitoring systems comprehensively capture activities conducted by community-based organisations.
5. Strengthen and promote adequate pay for the child protection workforce at the community level.

⁷ For more information on operational capacity building, consider referring to the [Framework for Strengthening Institutional Capacity of National and Local Actors](#) produced by the Global Education Cluster and the CP AoR.

⁸ For guidance on tracking localisation efforts, refer to the CP AoR’s newly developed [Localisation Dashboard Guidance and Toolkit](#).

Increase Child Participation

While child participation is seen at the local level through the Ministry of Gender's *Children's Corners*, Save the Children's *Youth Parliament* that meets annually, and other programs facilitated by the implementation partners, children are not regularly involved in decision-making at the national level. Including children's voices in the development of protection response plans and policies is valuable for relevant programming. The following recommendations could be considered to bring children's voices to the national level in Malawi:

1. Continue to promote children's participation at the local level by consulting them to understand their realities and to adapt programs to their needs.
2. Create concrete pathways in which information obtained from children at the local level can be brought to and influence actors at the national level.
3. When possible, create spaces for children to directly engage with, and influence decision-making at the national level.

Increase Country-Specific Support

The stakeholders interviewed praised the 2018 training and identified it as the agent of change for increased coordination of child protection issues in Malawi. As this training was regional, the stakeholders expressed interest in country-specific trainings tailored to the Malawian context. Country-specific support could better equip protection workers and government actors across multiple sectors and ensure that more than a handful of actors benefit from it. This is especially important when there is high turnover among staff. Having country-level trainings would allow more people within each sector to attend and also disseminate the information to their colleagues. Moreover, it is important for community-based workers to be involved in these trainings so they can better advocate for child protection needs in their communities. The following recommendations could be considered:

1. Future CPIE trainings should be more specific to the Malawian context and made available to a larger group of stakeholders within Malawi, including government actors, non-governmental partners, and community representatives.
2. Trainings should have a focus on the priority issues within Malawi as identified by local groups.
 - Open discussions with community organisations should be facilitated within these trainings and used to inform training focus areas.
 - Involve community workers in the design and implementation of CPIE trainings, ensuring that trainings are relevant all the way down to the local level.

CONCLUSION

The 2018 training was successful in addressing coordination issues but fell short in localising implementation efforts. Nonetheless, Malawi has seen substantial strengthening of protection mechanisms at the national level which has allowed for fruitful child protection efforts despite the difficult climate of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future trainings in the region should focus on strengthening mechanisms at the subnational level. A clear strategy around shifting power and funding into local hands would further promote localisation of child protection efforts in Malawi.