

Homemaking in communities recovering from disaster 2005 to 2025

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This report summarises findings from a collaborative scoping project in Malawi on the topic of homemaking following extreme weather events. We worked with communities that have been displaced temporarily or permanently from their original homes by recent flooding and landslide events. Focus group discussions incorporating visual explorations of ‘home’ were held with community members at sites in four districts of southern Malawi, and their testimonies of impact, response, needs and hopes were complemented with discussions at a workshop with national stakeholders from government, NGOs and universities. Through this exploratory research, we aimed to better understand people's key expectations/aspirations for recreating a sense of home in their new or reconstructed dwellings, the extent to which this has been or is being realised presently, and the conditions required in order to achieve a holistic sense of home. Key in this is discussion that includes, but goes beyond, questions of the material construction and provision of hard infrastructure to consider more intangible, environmental and symbolic aspects of homemaking. The study engages with an increasing concern globally among agencies that are undertaking resettlement and reconstruction interventions on how to support a more holistic approach to homemaking for disaster-affected communities.

Introduction

This research report focuses on the issue of homemaking in communities recovering from disasters in Malawi. Rapid-onset hazards such as landslides, floods and cyclones typically result in losses of houses or damage of such severity that the structure is rendered uninhabitable. Families displaced from their homes require immediate emergency sheltering such as tents or tarpaulins, and associated water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, until a secure and permanent solution is possible – which may involve repair, reconstruction or resettlement to a new location.

We report on scoping research carried out in 2024 with disaster-affected communities in southern Malawi, in sites that have been devastated by recent hazard events. This exploratory work is a contribution to efforts to understand better how organisations can support homemaking after disasters so that people affected by such events can be better able to re-create a sense of ‘home’ after they have

lost so much (Sou and Webber, 2019). This requires a holistic approach – understanding the many elements that constitute ‘home’ for disaster-affected people (Brun and Lund, 2008) – aided by the blending of expertise across disciplines within both research and practice.

Our starting point is the recognition that rehousing interventions need to consider much more than the material structure of the dwelling. Any home should be a place to nurture psychosocial wellbeing, a place where one feels safe, healthy and able to flourish (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Even a provisional home may need to be a place suitable to pursue livelihood activities, and a place where children can learn and develop in a nurturing environment. Yet, all too often, shelter provision and reconstruction of dwellings are approached in a narrow, technical way that sidelines or even undermines such holistic needs (Few et al., 2023). New forms of research are needed to help understand what the re-generation of home should mean and to assess how those insights might unlock more effective action (Neumark and Aker, 2024).

What we did

The team of researchers from University of Malawi, University of East Anglia, British Geological Survey, Malawi Geological Survey Department and the international research centre CRAterre undertook a series of 14 semi-structured group discussions with community members and village-level committees, complemented with discussions at a national stakeholder workshop in Lilongwe.

The sites selected were located in four southern districts of Malawi – Blantyre, Chikwawa, Chiradzulu and Phalombe – which, increasingly in recent years, have been severely affected by flood hazards, violent winds, mudslides and landslides, including major flooding events in 2015 and the multiple hazards generated during Cyclone Freddy in 2023 (Manda and Thindwa, 2025). In some cases, these disasters echoed the traumas sustained in previous disasters. For example, the communities in Phalombe experiencing powerful flash floods in 2023 also carried the memories of catastrophic flash floods that devastated much of the district in 1991.

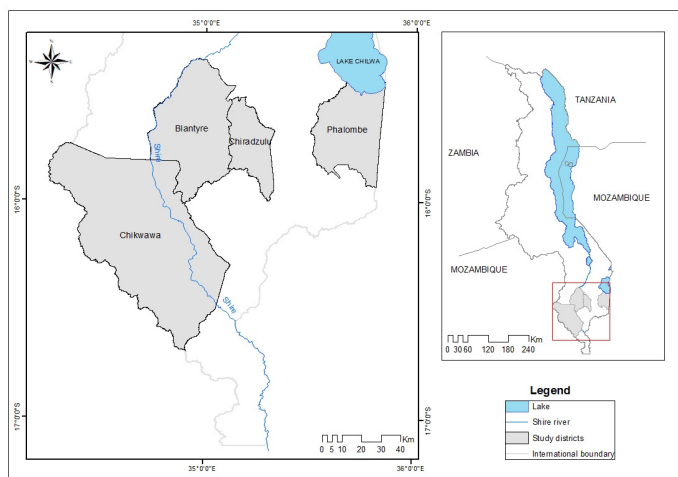


Figure 1: Districts in Malawi where the research took place. (Map drawn by Harvey Chilembwe (2025), University of Malawi, Zomba.)

The impacts of these events were shaped in part by a national context of relatively poorly developed domestic mechanisms for disaster risk reduction, external intervention by aid agencies, and an inevitably high reliance on people's own constrained capacities for self-recovery. The community groups we met across these sites had a mix of post-disaster experiences – some were living in resettlement areas, others had experienced housing losses and damage but had not received rehousing support by that time or were repairing damages themselves.

For these groups, interaction started wherever feasible with a participatory exercise in which they were requested to visualise a house on a large sheet of paper and add drawings and notes to the image to convey what is important in turning that house into a 'home'. This exercise

was then followed with guiding questions about the importance of these elements, and the issues faced in attempting to restore them in the aftermath of hazard events and/or displacement. Group size varied from 5-15, and we were flexible in terms of the numbers participating – not seeking to enforce a sampling frame for this exploratory work. In practice, once a group discussion started, it was common for others to join. However, there were several instances in which we purposefully arranged women-only groups, in order to broaden how we tested out the methodology. In general, the approach worked well in practice, though we recognised that if the initial drawing was a house shape, then it was difficult to guide the ensuing discussion away from material structure and contents of the house – modification of the technique could perhaps enable the discussion to move more easily to non-material aspects.



Figure 2: Participatory group work in Chikwawa district. Drawing on paper to visualise a house and discussing what represents the meaning of 'home'. (Photo: Nicole A.L. Manley, 2024.)

The national workshop was a roundtable event held in the capital, Lilongwe, bringing together 15 experts from civil society, academia and governmental agencies. The aim of this workshop was to discuss themes and issues raised in the field interactions with communities and facilitate an exchange of ideas on how to support a more holistic approach to homemaking for disaster-affected communities, especially in situations where external agencies (aid agencies, NGOs, national government) are undertaking resettlement and reconstruction interventions. Interactions were again facilitated through participants' visual depictions of home, followed by participatory mapping of research gaps and priority actions.

A detailed record was taken by the team of all interactions, and each subsequently prepared as a transcript. This qualitative data was then coded and collated across transcripts to develop the analytical themes reported below.

Conceptions of home

In the conversations in communities about what composes a 'home', the discussion commonly started with the more material aspects of the house structure – having sound building materials, a strong roof, adequate room numbers and sizes, as well as the basic utilities of water and sanitation access and electricity supply. The conversation also commonly moved toward more livelihood-related characteristics of the house location, including having nearby access to farm plots and other sources of income, to markets, to schools and to health services. As the interactions developed further, participants were encouraged to reconsider aspects beyond the material, about any broader aspects of wellbeing that people centrally associated with the concept of home. In all the community groups, people began to describe a range of social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing aspects, associations with home that we then heard repeated by many participants at the national workshop: articulating 'home' in terms of community, kinship, safety, identity, belonging, aesthetics, and connection with nature and animals.

In all 14 of the group discussions in communities, people spoke of what they ideally wanted from the environment immediately around the house. All but one group referred to the importance of plant life, especially of trees, but also having space for planting flowers and vegetables and garden space for relaxation, socialising and for children's play. Trees were appreciated for their shade, for providing oxygen and acting as windbreaks, as well as sources of firewood and fruit. Most people also wanted to be able to maintain the tradition of keeping animals near the house, especially having coops (kraals) for chickens, but also small livestock such as goats and dogs for security and companionship. One resettled group noted that they are not allowed to keep goats in the resettlement site.

Also commonly expressed were considerations of security, peace, privacy and kinship. Around half of the groups reflected, in some sense, on home as a place where one should feel at peace and in harmony with those living around. A sense of safety was key, especially from the threats of crime and violence, although one group in flood-impacted Chikwawa referred directly to having protection from future hazards via raised house foundations. Several groups explicitly identified the desire for having fencing around houses, for security in part but also for privacy and the concept of having well-defined boundaries. Among the resettled groups, one person in Chiradzulu stated "if the houses were in a fence, it could have been better", and a resettled group in Chikwawa noted that households were not officially allowed to erect fences, but that people have started to do so, and some have even planted hedges.

In around half of the groups, people spoke about decorative

aesthetics within the house, emphasising how they saw a home as a place that has objects such as curtains, wall hangings, framed photographs, posters, baskets and flowers. Participants in Chiradzulu and Chikwawa also expressed the importance of having radios in their homes to relax and relieve stress, to have access to weather warnings and forecasts, but also to help them to stay connected to the wider community.

Several groups emphasised this importance of the home being a place that enables interaction with family and relatives, and that expands connectivity to community. A participant from Blantyre stated that "relationship strengthens a home" and one group from Chiradzulu claimed that a house that does not foster relationships will be abandoned. Having a place, inside or outside, suitable to receive visitors is a symbol of respect that allows them to feel at home. Equally, all groups desired separate rooms for parents and children and considered this important, enabling parents to develop a home that maintains their children's wellbeing, as parents have their own space away from their children.

The difference between a house as a structure and a home as a place for living well was expressed in this way by one participant from a resettlement area in Blantyre: "The home is where everyone would get whatever is required.... With this house standing there, it is not possible. It's only a feeling that they own a house but not a home". Clearly, the nature of the physical elements of housing was key, but many other elements were inherent in how people conceived of creating a sense of home.

Losses and restoration capacities

Each of the groups that we spoke with had experienced significant disaster impacts in their communities, with aspects that fundamentally disrupted the elements of home discussed above. Some completely lost their houses in the floods and landslides, others had key possessions stripped away or irrevocably damaged, many of them vital for income generation. The losses highlighted by participants included items such as bedding, water storage buckets, water pipes, agricultural tools, sewing machines, motorcycles and bicycles. Many also spoke of how their animals had been swept away, including chickens, goats, cats and dogs, how they lost their crops or how their gardens and their croplands were no longer usable for farming. In Chikwawa, floods has both eroded fertile land, and deposited thick layers of silt on other stretches, making it impossible to plant trees and crops without the capacity for major investment in restoration of the environment. In Phalombe, for some participants, loss of infrastructure appeared to be equated with a drop in social status. One older male participant repeatedly lamented the destruction

of his home 'with electricity', something at that time uncommon in the community.



Figure 3: Tropical Cyclone Freddy in March 2023 caused a second landslide in Phalombe, striking the same village 32 years after a devastating landslide in 1991. (Photo: Nicole A.L. Manley, 2024.)

As noted above, roughly half of the groups we spoke with were people who had not received resettlement assistance. Instead, they had to either try to rebuild their lives in situ with limited external assistance or try to cope in places where they had been forced to migrate, sometimes to shelter sites or to relatives elsewhere. Some of the aspects of homemaking noted above might re-develop spontaneously through recovery as these people gradually mould and adapt their social and physical environment to match their needs. But this is seldom easy, especially for households coping with the trauma and inequities of disaster impact, and the experience of assistance and intervention can be crucial in shaping how effectively people can recreate home.

In Phalombe, many of the people we spoke with argued that they were unable to recover effectively after their houses were destroyed because the limited money that can earn now is used for rent, food and other essentials, with nothing left to start rebuilding their lives. Though one donor organisation had offered to construct new houses, the requirement that people must first purchase a plot of suitable land makes this unfeasible for most. In Chikwawa, people also spoke of the lack of external aid reaching them, which is making recovery only gradual at best. Some had tried to rebuild after one disaster, only for another to disrupt things once again. Displacement had not only left many with major difficulties in accessing jobs and services but also undermined people's sense of community and belonging. People in Chiradzulu expressed how they feel emotionally insecure ever since their houses were washed away: they do not have a permanent place to call home and are living in rented houses from which they can be evicted anytime the landlord wants.

One dilemma here is that many people essentially want to return to their former home place, to remain close to what they know and who they know. Some harbour negative feelings about being resettled elsewhere if that option were to be available. From groups in Chiradzulu that had not been resettled, we heard that people were fearful that if they were given a new place to stay then they would not be welcomed and/or be threatened by those living nearby. One participant said: "Yes, it happens if one has just been given the land to settle and that the neighbours may start giving you headache". Another added: "You fail to have peace on the land you are living on because of your neighbours".

Participants who were unable to relocate independently and are now living with relatives also spoke of the hardship of not having their own home, and the sense that they now lacked agency to make decisions and communicate their needs. They expressed the proverb: "Staying with relatives is the pinnacle of poverty" ("kugona kwa eni ndi umphawi"). This suggests that although people prefer to stay near relatives, they strongly desire the independence of their own homes in the vicinity of relatives.

However, for others, the original home site itself has now become a source of fear because of the experience of living through a severe hazard there. In Phalombe, one of the participants explained that they struggle to sleep during rainy nights and often gather at the church. Others said that the households that survived the flash floods are now located closer to the river, which has changed its course and now flows through the community where many of the houses are weakened. Even if the river is redirected, they expressed concerns about returning to their homes or land, as they do not feel safe doing so. For this group, resettlement was the preferred option.

Experiences of resettlement

In each district, we spoke with groups of people who had been resettled in newly constructed houses provided by the government and by non-governmental organisations to try to ascertain how well the new dwellings met their concepts of home, and to reflect on their experience of resettlement intervention.

In the Chikwawa study site, a large area of resettlement houses was provided following the 2015 floods. The residents we spoke with appreciated the fact that they now possessed ownership documents for the properties. They generally felt safer from floods in their new location, in part because of the slightly higher elevation but also because the new structures had stronger foundations, although there were ongoing concerns about hazards, especially as the roofs of 14 houses had been badly damaged by strong winds in 2019. People had started planting some kitchen crops around the house and some had created fence or hedge

boundaries. People regretted the absence of trees on the properties, however, and livestock keeping was neither planned for nor permitted at the resettlement site. Potable water supplies were also a major challenge, with communal water taps that had been provided for 25 households having been stolen. When resettled people visited boreholes in neighbouring areas, they reported facing hostility from the residents there.

At the Blantyre site, though the group we spoke with had yet to receive ownership documents they felt reassured that a verbal agreement for them to relocate to the area had been reached with representatives from the surrounding communities in the presence of district council officials. They appreciated the physical strength of the new houses that could easily withstand the rains compared with the weaker bricks that they had previously used, and they stated that they are allowed to plant trees at the site. However, water supplies are again a serious problem, with no borehole nearby: one participant stated, “we are using water from unprotected open water sources”. For children, there were also major problems in accessing the nearest primary school, which required a long, tiring and unsafe walk.

In Chiradzulu, resettlement houses were provided by different organisations after the major landslide disaster, with some variation in specifications and associated conditions. One large site was located several kilometres from the original village, while other smaller rehousing developments lay around the original village. All people benefited from having solidly constructed dwellings and some also had been granted agricultural plots, though at a distance from the dwellings. One participant said: “We feel ownership because they [Government] gave us the place as ours, they also gave us farmland, so we feel it is indeed given to us, and they accepted that it is ours”. Some had been given goats by donors – 30 households had been given five goats each, with the expectation that when they reproduce, the kids would be given to the remaining households in the site. The meeting with local leaders at Chiradzulu revealed a strong desire for more disaster-affected households to be rehoused or relocated, although it was also pointed out that some people had returned from the more remote site because they preferred to be with extended family and in the place where they know better how to earn a living. For this site, long walking distances to the nearest schools, health facilities and markets presented a major problem for the new residents.

At the time of the study, the resettlement process for victims of severe flash floods at Phalombe appeared to be particularly problematic. The group we spoke with stated that although 28 households were identified to receive rehousing, only 10 houses had been approved, and construction had started in only seven of those. In order to

qualify for housebuilding, the household has to first acquire vacant land in an area not considered at high risk from hazards. Not only is this expensive for a family that has suffered severe losses, but it means that they are unlikely to be able to resettle in locations they desire – with good access to their relatives and to places where they can farm.



Figure 4: Resettlement house in Chiradzulu, constructed after the mudslide disaster in 2023. (Photo: Nicole A.L. Manley, 2024.)

Implications of the scoping research

This study, while reaffirming the fundamentally important material aspects of rehousing, has also made clear that, even in the extreme situation of disaster displacement, there are critical aspects beyond the physical structure that are of vital importance to people’s values and wellbeing (Blunt and Varley, 2004; Heath, 2025). Homemaking after disasters has dimensions that are environmental, cultural, relational and emotional, as well as connecting with unsurprisingly heightened desire for safety and solace (Few et al., 2023). In this sense, the idea of homemaking as bounded within the physical dwelling becomes untenable: boundaries blur as people connect a sense of home with relatives, neighbours, trees, animals and the wider socio-ecological environment.

Our approach was exploratory and the methodology certainly capable of refinement, particularly to help discussions to move beyond the perhaps default focus on physical aspects of housing to the more intangible elements of recreating home. Our conversations certainly affirmed the importance that people place on the physical structure, and we assuredly do not seek to undervalue its importance. However, as researchers we also need to find ways to enable other aspects of home to emerge into consideration. We learned through the creative process of interacting with different groups through drawing, for example, that depictions of home life do not need to start with the external fabric of walls and roofs. They can be centred instead around other potential conceptions of wellbeing -

comfort, activity, security, ambience and connectivity with others – using these as a starting point for exploring what home means and how it can be achieved and supported.

It is increasingly recognised among shelter provision agencies that rehousing after disasters requires responsive planning and that there needs to be a multi-sectoral framing of approaches to resettlement/reconstruction interventions (Comerio, 2014; Sou and Weber, 2019). This study further underlines the need to work with, rather than simply for, disaster-affected communities if interventions are to be effective and sustainable (Manda and Thindwa, 2025). Our discussions at national level in Malawi indicated historic cases where resettlement sites had been abandoned, including a government-implemented project in 2007 in which households who were allocated land parcels ultimately rejected the new sites and returned to their original locations. Study participants in Chiradzulu stated that the plans for the resettlement houses came from the donor organisations without consultations with beneficiaries, communities or village committees – they were done in a standardised way. There was little involvement of people to input ideas on what they valued.

It is important to acknowledge that rehousing and resettlement is a highly complex undertaking, and it is never easy to reconcile multiple needs. Consultation and community engagement take time, and the processes may not sit well with political arguments for speed and efficiency in rehousing provision (Fayazi and Lizzaralde, 2018). For a country such as Malawi, it is also a huge financial challenge: reconstruction needs after Cyclone Freddy, for example, have presented a cost beyond the capacity of the Malawian economy alone. But if resettlement ultimately fails, it constitutes a further drain on resources (Oliver Smith, 1991). Viewed this way, rehousing that is sensitive to the idea of homemaking can not only be conducive to wellbeing but also cost-effective in the long-term.

Many aspects from the Malawi context are likely to be generalisable to notions of homemaking across the globe. But, as with all aspects of post-disaster intervention, there is seldom a blueprint that applies universally in its detail. To avoid ‘oven-ready’ assumptions about conceptions of home, it is vital to listen to the voices of those whose homes have been disrupted or lost.

Acknowledgements

Foremost, we owe our thanks to the community members that we met and spoke with in all the study sites for sharing with us their experiences and perspectives, and to the stakeholders we met with at the national level workshop. The project was supported through the BGS International NC programme ‘Geoscience to tackle Global Environmental Challenges’ (NERC reference NE/X006255/1), and funded through an International Science Partnership Fund grant administered via the University of East Anglia.

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