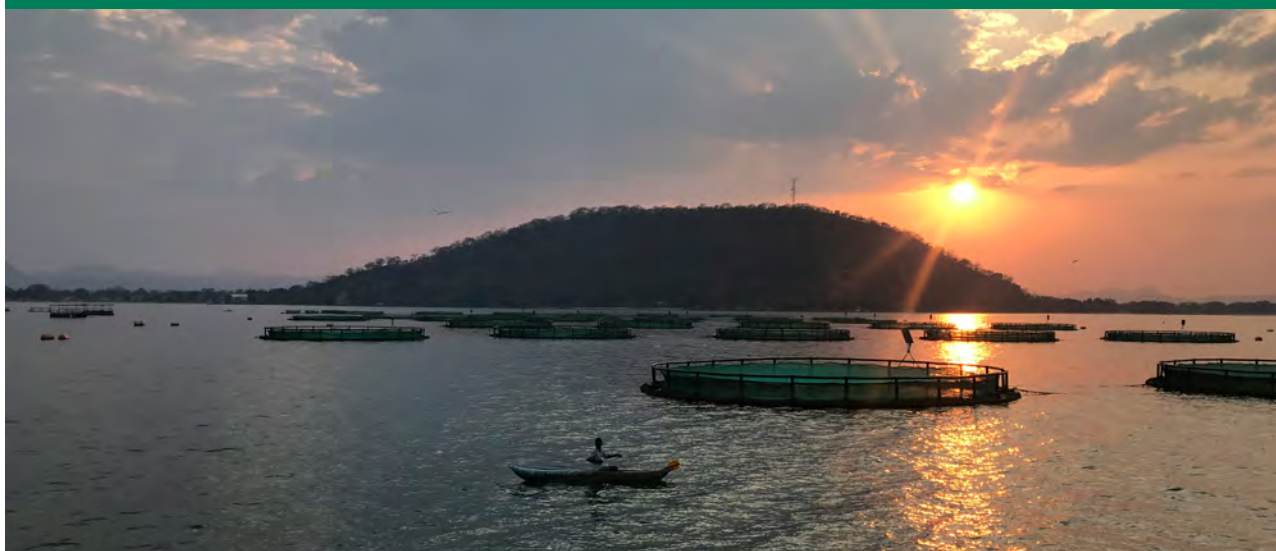




LIFE-AR

LDC Initiative for Effective
Adaptation and Resilience



Strengthening the District Development Planning System: Malawi's Strategy for a Locally Led Delivery Mechanism



Grant signing ceremony with district representatives. Credit: LIFE-AR Malawi

A LOCAL AND NATIONAL CHALLENGE

VULNERABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES

Malawi is highly vulnerable to climate change due to its dependence on rain-fed agriculture, natural resource-based livelihoods and exposure to climate hazards such as floods, droughts and erratic rainfall. These shocks increasingly affect food security, water resources, infrastructure and livelihoods particularly for rural communities.

ALIGNED NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The Government of Malawi has recognised climate change as a major threat to achieving national development ambitions under Malawi Vision 2063, which aims to transform the country into an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation. Climate resilience is therefore central to national planning frameworks including the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) process, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and sectoral development strategies. These frameworks emphasise strengthening institutions, improving access to climate finance, and embedding climate action within national and local development systems.

STRENGTHENING LONG TERM RESILIENCE

To strengthen long-term climate resilience and ensure climate finance reaches those most affected, Malawi is implementing the LDC Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR). Through LIFE-AR, Malawi is leveraging its existing district development planning system (DDPS) as a country-led delivery mechanism, embedding climate action within government structures and prioritising community-identified investments. The initiative supports long-term planning, inclusive governance and stronger institutional capacity to manage climate risks across national and local levels.

This summary explains how Malawi's delivery mechanism works and how it supports locally led climate-resilient development.

WHAT IS A DELIVERY MECHANISM AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Effective climate finance requires delivery mechanisms that enable funding to contribute to long-term national development objectives rather than being channelled through fragmented, short-term projects. A delivery mechanism provides the institutional, financial and governance arrangements through which climate finance is planned, channelled, implemented and monitored, ensuring alignment with national development priorities, public financial management systems and decentralised governance structures.

DMs are designed to strengthen country institutions, processes and systems for effective planning, designing, financing and execution of climate responses. One of the core objectives of the DM is that systems are strengthened to allow at least 70% of climate finance to be channelled to the appropriate local level in support of community-prioritised adaptation investments. Central to this approach are inclusive governance arrangements that define how decisions are made, by whom and with what accountability, enabling meaningful participation by local governments, communities and other stakeholders.

For LIFE-AR, delivery mechanisms are essential to achieving systemic and sustained change. They enable countries to move away from externally driven, stand-alone interventions towards nationally led and locally grounded approaches that reinforce decentralisation, build institutional capability and embed climate action within existing planning and coordination platforms. By investing in delivery mechanisms, countries support both immediate adaptation outcomes and the longer-term capabilities required to manage climate risks beyond individual funding cycles, while creating scalable platforms that can also channel non-LIFE-AR finance enhancing sustainability, value for money and development impact.

For Malawi, the delivery mechanism provides a pathway for strengthening decentralised systems so that climate responses are coordinated, inclusive and scalable.



Figure 1 - A framework for categorising the components of delivery mechanisms



Flooded field part of the irrigation scheme in Salima. Credit: LIFE-AR Malawi

MALAWI'S DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT PLANNING SYSTEM

Design

Malawi's LIFE-AR delivery mechanism is anchored in the District Development Planning System (DDPS), the country's legally mandated framework for planning and delivering development at local level. Rather than creating parallel structures, the mechanism strengthens existing institutions and processes that already link communities, district councils and national government. LIFE-AR is strengthening the DDPS to:

- Enable participatory planning so communities can identify climate priorities that suit their needs
- Integrate climate risk assessments and climate information services within district planning cycles.
- Enhance monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems to generate evidence for learning and scale.
- Improve fiduciary systems to manage climate finance effectively and transparently.
- Enhance inclusive governance that enables meaningful participation of women, youth, and marginalised groups.

Malawi's DDPS relies on a series of governance structures that link communities to district and national decision-making, ensuring that community priorities—including climate adaptation needs—are captured and integrated into planning:

- Village Development Committees (VDCs): Consult communities to identify development needs and prepare Village Action Plans (VAPs).
- Area Development Committees (ADCs): Consolidate VAPs into Area Development Plans (ADPs).
- District Development Plans (DDPs): Prepared by aggregating ADPs, then reviewed and implemented by District Councils, with technical guidance from District Executive Committees (DECs).

Through LIFE-AR, these structures are strengthened to integrate climate risk information, prioritise resilience-focused investments and improve coordination across sectors. This approach ensures that planning is participatory, inclusive and embedded within legally mandated structures, reinforcing national development objectives while building long-term climate resilience at scale.

Components of the delivery mechanism

Malawi's delivery mechanism is built around four core components:

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION
Adaptation & Resilience Fund (ARF)	The ARF introduces a resilience-building account at the district level, providing predictable and sustained climate finance. 70% of the fund supports community-prioritised investments while 30% is allocated for strategic district-level initiatives. The fund operates alongside the Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers (IGFTs) enabling long-term integration of climate finance into existing development systems. It ensures that local priorities are funded flexibly and transparently and that climate investments align with district and national development plans.
Participatory and Integrated Climate Planning	LIFE-AR embeds climate risk assessments, resilience planning tools and capacity strengthening into Malawi's decentralised planning system. Communities identify development priorities that are integrated into district development plans, ensuring investments respond to climate risks. This component focuses on planning processes and methodologies, enabling local actors to make informed decisions.
Governance and Inclusion	This component strengthens coordination and decision-making across all levels of government and society, ensuring that women and other marginalised groups can participate and influence decisions. At the national level, governance structures convene national ministries, civil society, academia, development partners and the private sector to guide implementation. At the sub-national level, district councils and local committees help ensure that planning and investments reflect local priorities and the perspectives of diverse and often underrepresented groups.
Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL)	This component strengthens MEL systems at community, district and national levels, integrates climate knowledge and data into planning and strengthens the capacity of local government and community institutions. Tools such as community scorecards, outcome harvesting and performance assessments generate evidence that informs decision-making and allows the mechanism to adapt as it expands, reinforcing resilience outcomes over the long term.

Table 1 - The components of the delivery mechanism

Malawi has established robust institutional arrangements to provide strategic and technical oversight as the country tests innovations introduced into the District Development Planning System (DDPS) through LIFE-AR. At the national level, the National Steering Committee on Climate Change provides overall strategic direction, mobilises additional resources and ensures alignment with national policies, supported by a Joint Technical Committee that coordinates technical

oversight across government, civil society, academia, the private sector and development partners. Implementation is guided by specialized working groups for delivery mechanism design, MEL, with a Secretariat and Project Implementation Unit managing day-to-day operations. At the district level, DECs, ADCs and VDCs ensure that community priorities including climate adaptation needs are integrated into planning, investments are effectively managed and oversight is maintained.



Malawi is piloting the delivery mechanism in 3 districts, selected to represent the three regions of the country: Mangochi in the south, Salima in Central and Rumphi in the north.

A phased approach has been adopted for piloting starting with one area per district and bringing on board additional areas and district as more funding becomes available. The phased approach also allows Malawi to test and evolve (T&E) the DM innovations prior to scaling.



Strengthening sub-national and local climate governance institutions

The operationalisation of LIFE-AR in Malawi has focused on reinforcing governance structures within the DDPS. This includes District Councils, DECs, ADCs and VDCs, which provide a legally mandated platform for participatory planning and decision-making. These structures are designed to promote inclusive participation, with established provisions such as designated representation of women in VDCs, alongside broader policy guidance encouraging the involvement of women, youth and other marginalised groups. While gender balance and social inclusion are actively promoted, formal quotas are not uniformly mandated across all governance structures.

Members receive targeted capacity strengthening to equip them with the skills to facilitate community consultations, integrate climate risk information, and manage and monitor investments. This approach strengthens local ownership and institutional capacity, enabling district and community actors to operationalise LIFE-AR innovations within existing governance frameworks while building long-term resilience at scale.

Evidence-based and inclusive investments planning

Planning begins with participatory rural appraisal processes and community consultations through which communities assess climate risks and identify investments that address local vulnerabilities. These priorities are then packaged into investment proposals and assessed against strategic and technical criteria to ensure feasibility, climate relevance and alignment with district development plans. Proposed investments are further reviewed within district planning processes to confirm alignment with broader development priorities and available resources. Prior sensitisation of communities on available funding strengthens transparency, accountability and informed participation throughout the planning process.

This structured approach ensures that adaptation investments are risk-informed, inclusive and aligned with local development priorities while promoting equitable access to resources for all community members. As a result for example, women in Mangochi played a central role in identifying and implementing irrigation investments to address erratic rainfall and food insecurity. Appointment of a female as VDC chairperson demonstrates increased women's leadership and influence over land use and adaptation priorities.

Transparency, accountability and learning

LIFE-AR embeds transparency, accountability, and continuous learning across all stages of implementation. Communities are actively involved in identifying and prioritising investments, participating in implementation, and providing ongoing oversight. At the same time, District and national institutions ensure upward accountability while VDCs and ADCs strengthen downward accountability by maintaining feedback loops with communities. Grievance redress mechanisms provide accessible channels for communities to raise concerns related to investment decisions, contractor performance or compliance with agreed plans.

Learning is systematically integrated through documentation, knowledge sharing/exchange and capacity strengthening activities. Media engagement including documentaries and media tours alongside peer-to-peer exchanges at national and international levels supports the dissemination of lessons from pilot interventions and fosters continuous improvement. These processes enable adaptive management and help refine the delivery mechanism as it evolves.

Early learnings

Pilot implementation in Rumphi, Mangochi and Salima has highlighted successes and areas for improvement. For example, early awareness of available funding enables communities to plan effectively and prioritise investments aligned with their needs. Peer-to-peer learning and media engagement are strengthening awareness, facilitating knowledge exchange and building stakeholder buy-in. However, coordination gaps in contracting local artisans led to lost investments in some areas highlighting the need for improved oversight. Implementation was also delayed by heavy rains, material cost inflation and limited local technical capacity. Finally, it was observed that GESI integration requires continued support including dedicated budgets and facilitation to ensure meaningful participation of marginalized groups.

These observations have led to key interventions for scale up:

- Targeted capacity strengthening in climate risk assessment, financial management, procurement, MEL and GESI, supported by clear implementation guidelines will enhance the ability of local institutions to implement and oversee investments effectively.
- Strengthening MEL and data systems including documentation and peer learning will support evidence-based decision-making, inform future DDPs (2030–2040) and reduce risks during national expansion.



Small size fish pond to be rehabilitated and expanded in Salima. Credit: LIFE-AR Malawi

WHAT'S NEXT

Malawi will continue to test the innovation introduced into the DDPS through the Test and Evolve phase, strengthening the integration of climate adaptation within the District Development Planning System (DDPS). Building on early lessons from pilot districts, the focus will be on refining the system, strengthening institutional capacity and progressively scaling the mechanism through government structures while maintaining a strong emphasis on locally led adaptation.

Medium term priorities (2026–2030)

Use lessons learned during year 1 and 2 of implementation to:

- Mobilise and align climate finance from domestic and international sources to expand the ARF to additional districts while improving the predictability and timeliness of funding flows.
- Strengthen integration of climate risk information into district planning processes including enhancing access to climate data, early warning systems and climate information services to inform local decision-making.
- Enhance participatory and inclusive planning processes with targeted efforts to strengthen the meaningful participation of women, youth and marginalised groups supported by clearer guidance and resourcing for GESI integration.
- Build institutional and technical capacity at district and community levels, particularly in climate risk assessment, financial management, procurement and oversight of investments
- Strengthen MEL systems ensuring that data, evidence and learning are systematically integrated into district and national planning cycles to support adaptive management.

Long term scaling Pathway (beyond 2030)

- Embed climate adaptation fully into future District Development Plans (2030 - 2040).
- Establish a permanent, on-budget District Climate Fund modelled on lessons from the ARF.
- Attract large-scale climate finance by demonstrating a strong track record of delivery.

 @LDC LIFEAR

 www.linkedin.com/company/life-ar

 www.life-ar.org

The Least Developed Countries Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR) is a long-term LDC-led, LDC-owned initiative which aims to enhance climate resilience.



LIFE-AR is in the interim hosted by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and supported by the UK International Development from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Irish Aid, along with ClimateWorks Foundation and Quadrature Climate Foundation.