ASSESSING THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF HUMANITARIAN DISASTER AID IN PROMOTING DISASTER RISKS: A CASE STUDY OF GVH SAVALA, TA MAKHWIRA, CHIKWAWA

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the unintended consequences of humanitarian disaster aid in promoting disaster risks in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa district, Malawi. Chikwawa is the one of the most persistently flood-affected communities in the lower shire valley. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 44 household survey respondents and three institutional key informants representing Oxfam, Eagles Relief and Development Program, and the Chikwawa district council, supplemented by documentary review of relevant national and international policy frameworks. The findings reveal a deeply entrenched pattern of aid-induced dependency, characterised by deliberate maintenance of structurally weak housing in hazard zones to qualify for relief, manipulation of beneficiary registration systems, near-total absence of community participation in aid planning, and negligible engagement with village disaster risk management committees. With 93.2% of respondents experiencing annual or near-annual flooding and only 6.8% reporting improved flood preparedness following aid receipt, current humanitarian programming has demonstrably failed to build lasting resilience. A persistent gap between policy intent and field-level practice was identified, as the principles of Malawi's national DRM policy (2015), the Sendai framework (2015–2030), and the core humanitarian standard (2024) remain only partially operationalised in the study area. The study concludes that communities receive sufficient relief to survive each disaster but insufficient systemic support to reduce vulnerability to the next, and recommends mandatory integration of disaster risk reduction into humanitarian programming, enforcement of time-bound exit strategies, reform of targeting criteria, and accelerated adoption of anticipatory action approaches.

Keywords: humanitarian aid, aid dependency, disaster risk reduction, flood resilience, unintended consequences, Chikwawa, Malawi.

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ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

CBDRR	Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRMO	District Disaster Risk Management Officer
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GVH	Group Village Headman
IDIs	In-Depth Interviews
KII	Key Informant Interview
MUST	Malawi University of Science and Technology
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NFI	Non-Food Items
NPC	National Planning Commission
PAR	Pressure and Release Model
SFDRR	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TA	Traditional Authority
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
VDRMC	Village Disaster Risk Management Committee
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background Information

Disasters are typically triggered by extreme natural hazards such as floods, cyclones, droughts, earthquakes that disrupt societies (Chaudhary & Piracha, 2021). In official terms, a disaster is a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or society caused by a hazard interacting with societal vulnerabilities, resulting in human, economic and environmental losses (Ben. Wisner, 2004). These events are often measured by the damage to lives, homes and livelihoods (Markhvida et al., 2020). For example, recent global analysis finds that floods alone directly expose some 1.81 billion people which is about 23% of the world's population to risk (Rentschler et al., 2022). Rentschler et al. (2022) continues to stress that 89% of those at risk live in low- or middle-income countries that underscoring that disasters are widespread but hit the poorest nations hardest. Historically they were viewed as inevitable acts of nature beyond human control, but even in this natural-hazard framing their human impact is unmistakable (Jackson, 2021).

By the late 20th century, the emphasis shifted where researchers showed that disasters result from hazards intersecting with social vulnerabilities (Kelman et al., 2016). Wisner et al. (2004) argue that disasters are as much products of social, political, economic and environments as of natural events (C. Wisner & Nivaran, 2003). For instance, Lindersson et al., (2023) notes that factors like income level, access to services and political marginalization directly affect disaster risk and resilience, such that poorer and disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately. Thus, the field now stresses that a flood or cyclone only becomes a disaster when it encounters people whose vulnerability is high.

As this understanding grew, international policy and practice pivoted from reactive relief toward proactive risk reduction (UNDRR, 2022). The 2005–2015 Hyogo

Framework for Action explicitly promoted building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters, while its successor, the Sendai Framework (2015–2030), set ambitious targets to substantially reduce disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health (Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, n.d.; United Nations, 2005). At the same time, humanitarian agencies play a critical life-saving role (Hamilton et al., 2022). After Cyclone Idai (2019) for example, the Malawi government, UN agencies and NGOs coordinated an emergency response delivering clean water, sanitation, essential medicines and food relief to hard-hit districts (UNDP, 2019).

However, relief-oriented aid has long faced criticism. Analysts warn that constant post-disaster aid can erode local capacities (Karki et al., 2023). For example, Harvey & Lind, (2005) describe how protracted food aid has, in many contexts. Although evidence is mixed, this critique highlights that unchecked aid can unintentionally undermine self-reliance (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Field studies in Malawi echo these concerns where one assessment of Lower Shire flood projects found that relief-oriented aid approaches and an aid dependency syndrome represent obstacles to sustainable community-based flood management (Lumumba Mijoni & Izadkhah, 2009).

Building on these critiques, researchers are examining how humanitarian aid might create disaster risk over time. Repeated relief can foster an entitlement mentality (Karki et al., 2023). For instance, relief recipients may keep rebuilding in floodplains knowing aid will come again, rather than relocate (McCaughey et al., 2018). Harvey and Lind point out that if people become accustomed to support, it may take scarce labour away from other key livelihood strategies. These patterns corroborate the broader warning that frequent relief while saving lives can inadvertently discourage proactive risk reduction, effectively trapping communities in vulnerability (Lumumba Mijoni & Izadkhah, 2009).

Recognizing these pitfalls, modern policies explicitly aim to align aid with resilience. Malawi's 2015 National Disaster Risk Management Policy, for example, prioritizes resilience-enhancing interventions and the reduction of underlying risks alongside preparedness and response (Government of Malawi, 2015). Likewise, the Sendai

Framework's goals center on managing disaster risk before crises hit (UNDRR, n.d., 2015). Humanitarian quality standards have likewise evolved where commitment 3 of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) demands that aid should strengthen local capacities and avoid negative effects on affected communities (CHS Alliance, Group URD & Sphere Project, 2014). In short, current frameworks stress that assistance must build on and not undermine local coping ability (Guarnacci, 2016). These global and national guidelines reflect an explicit policy shift from pure relief toward sustainability and self-reliance.

These global trends are evident in Malawi's Lower Shire Valley, comprising Chikwawa and Nsanje districts, a low-lying region where roughly 900,000 people live in flood-prone areas along the Shire River (Mailosi et al., 2022). The valley has experienced repeated disasters, including Cyclone Idai in March 2019, which affected about 865,000 people (UNDP, 2019). Tropical Storm Ana in January 2022 affected about 871,000 people, with Chikwawa accounting for approximately 43% of those impacted (UNICEF, 2022). Despite significant humanitarian assistance from UN agencies, government and NGOs, communities remain highly exposed to flood risks (Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2018). In this context, repeated aid without sustainable planning can leave residents in a cycle of vulnerability (Arifeen & Nyborg, 2021). Understanding this context from how disasters are defined and managed to the pitfalls of aid is crucial for the study of Savala's experience with disaster relief.

Problem Statement

GVH Savala, within TA Makhwira in Chikwawa District, sits at the epicentre of one of Malawi's most persistent flood corridors, where recurrent flooding, cyclones, and tropical storms continue to destroy housing, disrupt livelihoods, and deepen community vulnerability. Despite receiving sustained humanitarian assistance from NGOs such as OXFAM and Eagles Relief and Development Program across successive disaster cycles, communities remain locked in chronic hazard exposure and post-disaster dependence. Households continue to inhabit low-lying flood-prone areas,

local preparedness mechanisms remain underdeveloped, and a persistent expectation of external relief has taken root.

Field observations have documented manipulation of beneficiary registration systems, deliberate maintenance of structurally weak housing to preserve aid eligibility, and the strategic construction of fragile dwellings in floodplains to ensure annual inclusion on beneficiary lists. These patterns consistent with broader literature warning that repeated relief erodes indigenous coping strategies and self-reliance (Harvey & Lind, 2005a; Karki et al., 2023; McCaughey et al., 2018).

This situation represents not merely an operational failure but a direct contradiction of the policy frameworks governing humanitarian action in Malawi. The National DRM Policy (2015), the Sendai Framework (2015–2030), and the Core Humanitarian Standard (2024) all mandate a decisive shift from reactive relief toward resilience-building and the explicit avoidance of aid-induced dependency. Yet as Lumumba Mijoni & Izadkhah, (2009) found in the Lower Shire Valley, relief-oriented approaches and an entrenched dependency syndrome continue to obstruct sustainable community-based disaster risk management. There remains a critical absence of systematic household-level evidence in Malawi documenting how sustained humanitarian aid shapes disaster risk accumulation and preparedness behaviour over time. This gap is directly addressed by this study by examining whether humanitarian aid in GVH Savala is unintentionally promoting disaster risk, and what reforms are needed to align practice with policy.

Research Objectives

Main Objective

The main objective of this study is to assess the unintended consequences of humanitarian disaster aid in promoting disaster risks in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa District.

Specific Objectives

i. To evaluate the local and external aid practices align with national DRM policy and international resilience principles.

ii. To assess community perceptions regarding the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of humanitarian disaster aid interventions.

iii. To evaluate the short- and long-term impacts of humanitarian aid on local coping mechanisms, self-reliance, and community-based disaster preparedness.

Research Questions

i. What types of post-disaster aid do people in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira receive, and how is it delivered?

ii. How do community members perceive the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of the humanitarian aid they receive?

iii. Does repeated humanitarian aid unintentionally create dependency, promote risky behaviours, or discourage relocation from flood-prone areas?

iv. To what extent do current aid practices align with Malawi's DRM Policy and the Sendai Framework's resilience-building priorities?

Significance of the Study

This study makes a timely and necessary empirical contribution at a moment when the gap between humanitarian policy ambition and community-level reality in Malawi has never been more consequential. While Malawi's National DRM Policy (2015), the Sendai Framework (2015–2030), and the Core Humanitarian Standard (2024) collectively mandate a decisive shift from reactive relief to resilience-building, no systematic household-level study has examined whether this transition is occurring in one of the country's most persistently flood-affected communities.

By generating quantitative and qualitative evidence directly from GVH Savala, this study provides the first ground-level documentation of how repeated humanitarian aid shapes dependency behaviour, risk accumulation, and preparedness capacity at the

household scale. This will filling a critical gap that district-level institutional analyses, such as those by Šakić Trogrlić et al. (2018) and Hendriks and Boersma (2019), have left unaddressed.

Beyond its academic contribution, the study carries direct policy and programmatic significance. The evidence that 93.2% of respondents experience annual or near-annual flooding, yet only 6.8% report improved flood preparedness following aid receipt, reveals that the current humanitarian model in GVH Savala is not merely failing to build resilience but it is also actively reinforcing the conditions that sustain disaster risk.

These findings are directly relevant to government agencies, NGOs, donors, and humanitarian actors operating in Chikwawa and comparable flood-prone districts across southern Africa, and provide the empirical foundation needed to enforce policy compliance, reform targeting criteria, and anchor programmatic design in community-level evidence rather than institutional assumption.

2. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter critically reviews existing literature on humanitarian disaster aid, disaster risk reduction, and community resilience. It examines the empirical evidence on aid's dual role as both a lifesaver and a potential driver of dependency, explores the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding this study, and situates the research within relevant national and international policy contexts.

Understanding Disasters: From Natural Hazards to Social Vulnerability

The background to this study establishes that disasters are not simply the products of extreme natural events but emerge from the intersection of hazards with socially constructed vulnerabilities (Chaudhary & Piracha, 2021; Ben. Wisner, 2004). Where disasters were historically framed as inevitable acts of nature, the late 20th century witnessed a decisive paradigm shift, with researchers demonstrating that the human toll of any hazard event is fundamentally shaped by the social, political, and economic conditions of those exposed (Kelman et al., 2016; C. Wisner & Nivaran, 2003). This vulnerability-centred perspective, most systematically articulated in the Pressure-and-Release (PAR) model. It has developed by Wisner and colleagues (2003), holds that structural factors such as poverty, weak governance, inadequate land-use planning, and limited access to services create the conditions under which hazards become disasters. Lindersson et al., (2023) reinforce this by demonstrating that income level, political marginalisation, and exclusion from public services directly shape disaster risk and recovery outcomes, such that poorer and disadvantaged groups consistently suffer disproportionate losses.

Rentschler et al., (2022) quantify this global pattern, finding that 89% of the 1.81 billion people directly exposed to flood risk live in low- or middle-income countries. This underscoring that disaster vulnerability is inseparable from structural inequality. This shift means that if vulnerability is created by social conditions, humanitarian aid must go beyond responding to immediate disaster impacts (Arifeen & Nyborg, 2021).

If it does not address the root causes of vulnerability, it cannot break the disaster cycle. As Markhvida et al., (2020) argues, measuring disasters solely by damage to lives, homes, and livelihoods risks obscuring the deeper structural drivers that reproduce risk across successive events.

Global Overview: Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Risk

Humanitarian action and disaster risk reduction are increasingly recognised as complementary rather than competing efforts, both essential to protecting vulnerable populations from escalating impacts of natural hazards Mena, (2025). Humanitarian disaster aid is characterised by its immediacy, aiming to save lives and alleviate suffering through emergency delivery of food, shelter, medical care, and water after sudden-onset shocks (Onyango et al., 2025). Ideally, aid is distributed impartially, based on assessed need and without discrimination (Harvey & Lind, 2005a).

However, the humanitarian system has long struggled with the tension between emergency response and sustainable development (Fukuyama, 2001). GFDRR (2017) meta-analysis shows that global humanitarian aid expenditure consistently outpaces investment in disaster prevention and preparedness, creating a structural imbalance that may increase long-term losses. Following the 2015 Nepal earthquake, humanitarian assistance had minimal lasting impact on the root causes of vulnerability, leaving communities exposed to future hazards with limited improvements in resilience (Marina Hülssiep, 2020). Similarly, after Cyclone Idai in southern Africa, despite large donor-funded relief efforts, analysts warned that without sustained investment in flood defences and livelihood diversification, affected communities would remain highly vulnerable to future hazard events (GFDRR), 2019).

This tension is not merely theoretical. Jackson, (2021) observes that even within the natural-hazard framing of disasters, the human impact of such events is unmistakable, and the concentration of losses among the poorest communities points to systemic failures in risk governance that emergency relief alone cannot correct. The broader literature therefore increasingly questions whether the global humanitarian system, structured as it is around reactive response rather than proactive risk reduction, is

institutionally equipped to support communities in moving out of recurring vulnerability cycles (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018).

Humanitarian Aid in Malawi: Empirical Evidence

Within Malawi's Lower Shire Valley, the dynamics between humanitarian aid and persistent disaster risk are particularly well documented. As established in Chapter One, the valley's roughly 900,000 flood-exposed residents have experienced repeated disasters (UNDP, 2019). Cyclone Idai in 2019 and Tropical Storm Ana in 2022, each triggering large-scale humanitarian responses from government, UN agencies, and NGOs (UNICEF, 2022). Yet despite this sustained investment in relief, communities across Chikwawa and Nsanje districts remain chronically exposed to flood hazards, pointing to a systemic failure in the transition from relief to resilience.

Robert Šakić Trogrlić1, (2017,2018) established that local flood risk management in Chikwawa and Nsanje is severely constrained by chronic underfunding and an over-reliance on external humanitarian actors, which sidelines local institutions and erodes community ownership of disaster risk management. Tanja D. Hendriks, (2019) similarly found that the 2015 Malawi flood response was almost entirely donor-led, with government and community structures playing marginal roles. This pattern has been observed elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, where externally driven humanitarian responses have been shown to crowd out local governance structures and reduce community motivation for self-organised risk management (Karki et al., 2023).

At the community level, post-flood aid in Malawi has been observed to function as a routine subsidy, effectively trapping households in high-risk zones rather than creating incentives for safer relocation (Tanja D. Hendriks, 2019). Lumumba Mijoni & Izadkhah, (2009), in a field study directly relevant to the Lower Shire Valley, found that relief-oriented aid approaches and an aid dependency syndrome represent significant obstacles to sustainable community-based flood management. A UNICEF review (2022) reinforced this, noting that despite years of sustained humanitarian programming in Chikwawa and surrounding districts, self-reliance and preparedness indicators remain persistently low. These findings reinforce a growing consensus in the

literature which say, while humanitarian aid remains essential for saving lives, its design frequently neglects the critical question of how communities transition from emergency relief back to self-sufficiency.

Positive Roles of Humanitarian Aid

It is important to acknowledge that when well-coordinated and properly designed, humanitarian aid can play a meaningful role in bridging the divide between immediate relief and longer-term risk reduction (Fukuyama, 2001). The background section of this study recognises the indispensable life-saving role that humanitarian agencies play, particularly in contexts like Malawi's Lower Shire Valley where hazard exposure is severe and household coping capacities are limited (Hamilton et al., 2022). Beyond immediate relief, assistance that incorporates resilient construction standards, facilitates relocation from extreme-risk zones, or integrates early warning systems with community training can meaningfully reduce future exposure (Mena, 2025). Where such integration has been achieved, aid has demonstrated its potential to address not only immediate disaster impacts but also the structural drivers of vulnerability.

At the community level, well-targeted cash transfers have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting dignified recovery while preserving household economic agency and decision-making autonomy (International Rescue Committee, 2025). Such approaches, when embedded within broader resilience-building programmes and accompanied by adequate exit strategies and livelihood diversification support, hold genuine promise for transforming aid from a passive relief mechanism into a catalyst for community-driven risk reduction (Kim & Loayza, 2019). The critical distinction in the literature is therefore not between aid and no-aid, but between aid that is designed with an explicit theory of change toward self-reliance and aid that is not.

Unintended Consequences of Aid: The Dependency Debate

The theoretical and empirical debate around aid-induced dependency occupies a central position in this study. Harvey and Lind (2005) argue that routine, predictable relief creates a structural trap in which communities delay adaptation measures and

sustain high-risk settlement patterns in anticipation of continued assistance. As the background notes, this is reflected in GVH Savala, where field informants have observed households maintaining structurally weak housing to remain eligible for shelter assistance and deliberately maintaining a second dwelling in a high-risk zone to secure annual relief.

McCaughey et al. (2018) provide comparative evidence for this dynamic, documenting how relief recipients in chronically affected communities rebuild in floodplains in the knowledge that assistance will follow the next disaster, rather than accepting the disruption and cost of voluntary relocation. Harvey and Lind (2005) further point out that when people become accustomed to external support, it can divert scarce labour away from other livelihood strategies, reducing the economic diversity that is itself a buffer against disaster. Karki (2021) frames this in terms of an entitlement mentality, arguing that repeated unconditional relief erodes the sense of individual and collective agency that sustainable risk reduction requires. Importantly, the dependency critique is not only a household-level phenomenon. Easton-Calabria (2018) cautions that the evidence on aid dependency is mixed and that blanket condemnations of relief can obscure the genuine life-saving necessity of assistance in acute emergencies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives that together provide a robust analytical lens for understanding the relationship between humanitarian aid and disaster risk.

The first model is the Pressure-and-Release (PAR) model. Originally developed by Wisner and colleagues (2003), conceptualises disasters not as natural events per se, but as the outcome of hazards intersecting with socially constructed vulnerabilities (Michellier et al., 2020). These vulnerabilities are rooted in structural factors such as poverty, weak governance, and limited livelihood diversification (Adger, 2006). They expressed through dynamic pressures including poor land-use planning, inadequate institutional capacity, and eroded social capital. The background to this study illustrates this model's explanatory power in the Lower Shire Valley context, where chronic

poverty, political marginalisation, and the absence of sustainable land-use planning have produced a population that is structurally exposed to flood risk across successive hazard events (Adger, 2006). From the PAR perspective, humanitarian aid that addresses only the immediate consequences of hazards without dismantling the root causes of vulnerability will not break the disaster cycle. It may temporarily relieve pressure but leaves communities equally, or more, exposed to the next shock.

The second framework is resilience theory that complements the PAR model. It foregrounding the capacities of communities to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and recover from hazard events while maintaining essential functions (Carl Folke, 2006). Resilience is not a static state but a dynamic process, shaped by the quality of social networks, the diversity of livelihoods, the effectiveness of early warning systems, and the degree of institutional support available to communities. The background section's documentation of persistently low preparedness indicators in Chikwawa, despite years of humanitarian programming, reflects precisely the erosion of resilience that the theory predicts when external assistance displaces rather than reinforces local coping mechanisms. If humanitarian aid undermines local preparedness, erodes trust in indigenous institutions, or displaces community-led strategies, it runs directly counter to resilience objectives and may deepen long-term disaster risk (Government of Malawi, 2015).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates the pathways through which different patterns of humanitarian aid delivery interact with disaster risk at the community level. Guided by the PAR model and resilience theory, the framework posits two contrasting trajectories.

In the first, recurrent emergency relief characterised by repeated food distributions, shelter provision, and cash grants without adequate exit strategies fosters aid dependency. This dependency progressively reduces the motivation and capacity for

adaptation and voluntary relocation. This can weakening household and community coping mechanisms and ultimately increasing disaster risk accumulation.

In the second trajectory, well-integrated resilience-building assistance, including support for relocation to safer areas, resilient housing construction, flood defence infrastructure, livelihood diversification, and investment in community-based early warning systems, can interrupt the dependency cycle. By addressing the root causes of vulnerability rather than simply treating its symptoms, this form of aid supports communities in building the adaptive capacity necessary to withstand and recover from future hazard events. This is aligning with both the Sendai Framework's priority areas and Malawi's National DRM Policy's emphasis on resilience over relief.

The mediating factors between these two trajectories include the quality of aid targeting, the degree of community participation in aid planning, the presence of effective institutional coordination between NGOs, government, and traditional leadership structures, and the coherence of aid practices with national and international policy frameworks. It is the interaction between these mediating factors and the design of humanitarian programming that this study investigates at the

community level in GVH Savala.

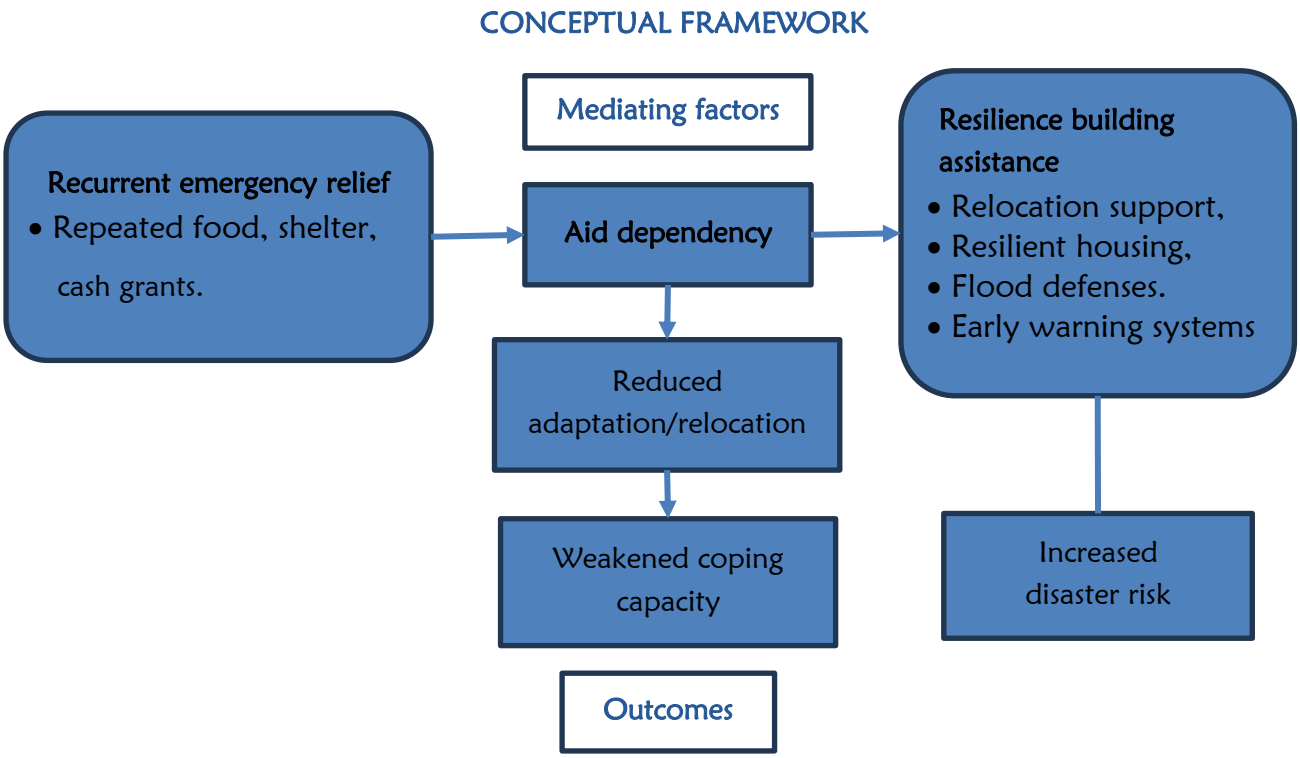


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of humanitarian aid and its influence on disaster risk (Amisi, 2026).

Policy and Institutional Context

At the international level, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) provides the authoritative policy architecture guiding this study. Building on its predecessor, the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015), which first explicitly promoted building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters, the Sendai Framework set ambitious targets to substantially reduce disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods, and health (UN/ISDR n.d.; United Nations, 2005). It calls for substantial investment in resilience and explicitly targets the root causes of disaster risk through four priority action areas. These priority areas are, understanding disaster risk, strengthening disaster risk governance, investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience, and enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response (UNDRR, 2015). The Framework's emphasis on linking emergency response to longer-term risk-informed recovery and reconstruction is directly relevant to the challenges documented in GVH

Savala, where the gap between policy aspiration and community-level reality remains wide.

Nationally, Malawi's National Disaster Risk Management Policy (2015) mirrors these priorities. It emphasises reducing underlying vulnerabilities through the promotion of safe construction standards, sustainable land-use planning, and the development of community-based early warning systems. Critically, the policy acknowledges that chronic reliance on relief assistance is itself a driver of disaster risk. Priority Area 5 specifically targets the reduction of unsustainable coping strategies and aid dependency through strengthened local planning and coordination. This policy recognition of aid dependency as a risk driver is significant. This means that the unintended consequences documented in GVH Savala are not merely an operational failure but a matter of national policy non-compliance.

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS, 2024), on Commitment three, further reinforces these obligations, requiring humanitarian actors to strengthen local capacities and explicitly avoid adverse effects such as dependency formation or the undermining of social cohesion. Guarnacci, (2016)situates these standards within a broader argument that aid must build on, rather than supplant, local coping ability if it is to contribute meaningfully to long-term resilience. Taken together, these global and national frameworks do not merely recommend a shift from relief to resilience; they mandate it. The central problem that this study addresses is therefore not the absence of appropriate policy, but the persistent failure to translate that policy into practice at the community level in GVH Savala.

Research Gaps

Despite the growing body of scholarship on humanitarian aid and disaster risk in sub-Saharan Africa, there remains a striking scarcity of rigorous empirical research examining the long-term unintended consequences of repeated relief at the community and household level in Malawi. Most existing studies treat humanitarian assistance primarily as a life-saving mechanism without interrogating whether its repeated application may inadvertently entrench dependency, disincentivise voluntary

relocation from hazard-prone areas, or erode the indigenous coping strategies that form a community's first line of defence against disaster. The broader global literature, particularly Harvey and Lind (2005), McCaughey et al. (2018), and Karki et al. (2023), provides compelling theoretical and comparative evidence for these dynamics, yet their application to Malawi's specific institutional and socio-ecological context remains largely untested.

The few Malawi-focused studies that engage with these questions, most notably Šakić Trogrlić et al. (2018) and Hendriks and Boersma (2019), are confined to district-level institutional analyses and do not capture the granular household-level dynamics through which aid shapes risk behaviour, preparedness motivation, and self-reliance across successive disaster cycles. Lumumba Mijoni and Izadkhah (2009) identified aid dependency as an obstacle to sustainable flood management in the Lower Shire Valley, but without the household survey evidence needed to quantify its magnitude or underlying mechanisms. This study directly addresses these gaps by generating mixed-methods evidence from GVH Savala to document, measure, and analyse the unintended consequences of humanitarian aid with the precision that meaningful policy reform demands.

3. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological framework employed to investigate the unintended consequences of humanitarian disaster aid in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira.

Study Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, systematically integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Quantitative methods were employed to generate measurable data on aid types, frequency, and coverage, enabling statistical description and cross-variable analysis through descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages. Qualitative methods, including key informant interviews (KIIs) and documentary review, were used to explore lived experiences, institutional perspectives, and contextual factors that numerical data alone cannot fully capture. A descriptive and exploratory design underpinned the overall inquiry, appropriate for a research domain where systematic household-level evidence is limited and where the aim is to describe and understand a complex social phenomenon rather than to test a predefined hypothesis.

The Study Area

Fieldwork was conducted in GVH Savala, located within TA Makhwira, Chikwawa District in southern Malawi. Situated in the Lower Shire Valley, GVH Savala lies on a low-lying floodplain adjacent to the Shire River and is characterised by high exposure to climate-related hazards, particularly seasonal flooding and tropical cyclones. The area experiences a tropical climate with a rainy season running from November to April, coinciding with peak flood risk. Key disasters in recent years include Tropical Storm Ana (2022) and Tropical Cyclone Freddy (2023), which caused widespread destruction to housing, crops, and infrastructure. GVH Savala was purposively selected for this study because of its documented history of repeated humanitarian aid receipt,

continued high-risk settlement patterns, persistent flood exposure, and limited evidence of resilience improvement over time.

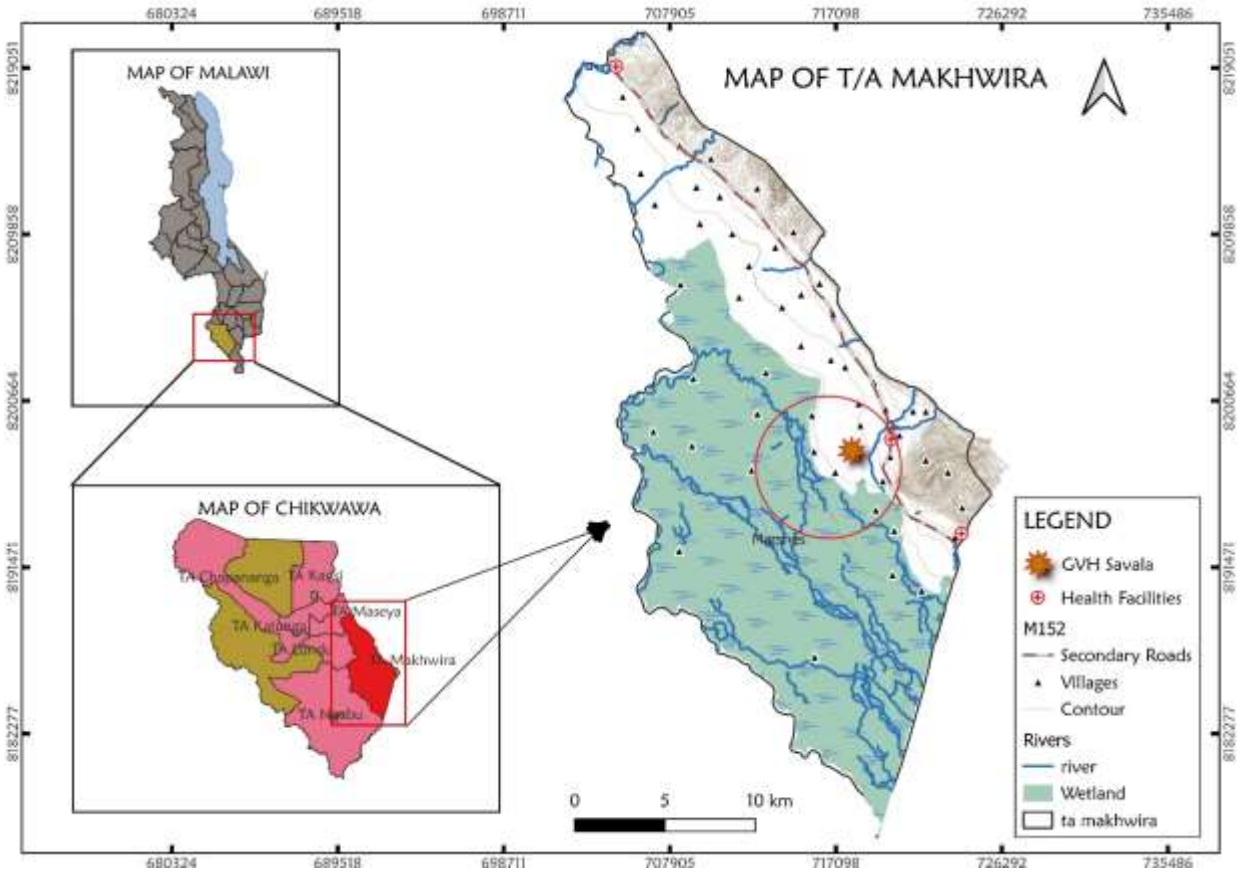


Figure 2: Map of TA Makhwira in Chikwawa District showing the location of the study area

Sampling Design

Population and Sample Size

The study population comprised households in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira. Based on the 2018 Malawi National Population and Housing Census, the population of TA Makhwira stands at 79,933. The sample size for household surveys was calculated using Yamane's (1967) simplified formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n = sample size, N = population size, and e = margin of error (0.15). Substituting the values:

$$n = \frac{79{,}933\ (2018\ \text{Malawi Census})}{\mathbf{1}+79{,}933(\mathbf{0.15})^2} = 44.41$$

*Therefore, the sample size was **44 people.***

Accordingly, a sample of 44 respondents was targeted for the household survey component.

Sampling Strategy

A stratified random sampling approach was employed for the household survey to ensure equitable representation across different sub-villages within GVH Savala, including both high-flood-impact and comparatively less-affected zones. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants, targeting individuals with direct professional expertise in humanitarian aid delivery and disaster risk management in Chikwawa District. Three key informants were interviewed: a programme officer from OXFAM, the Project Coordinator from Eagles Relief and Development Program, and the Disaster Risk Management Officer (DRMO) from the Chikwawa District Council.

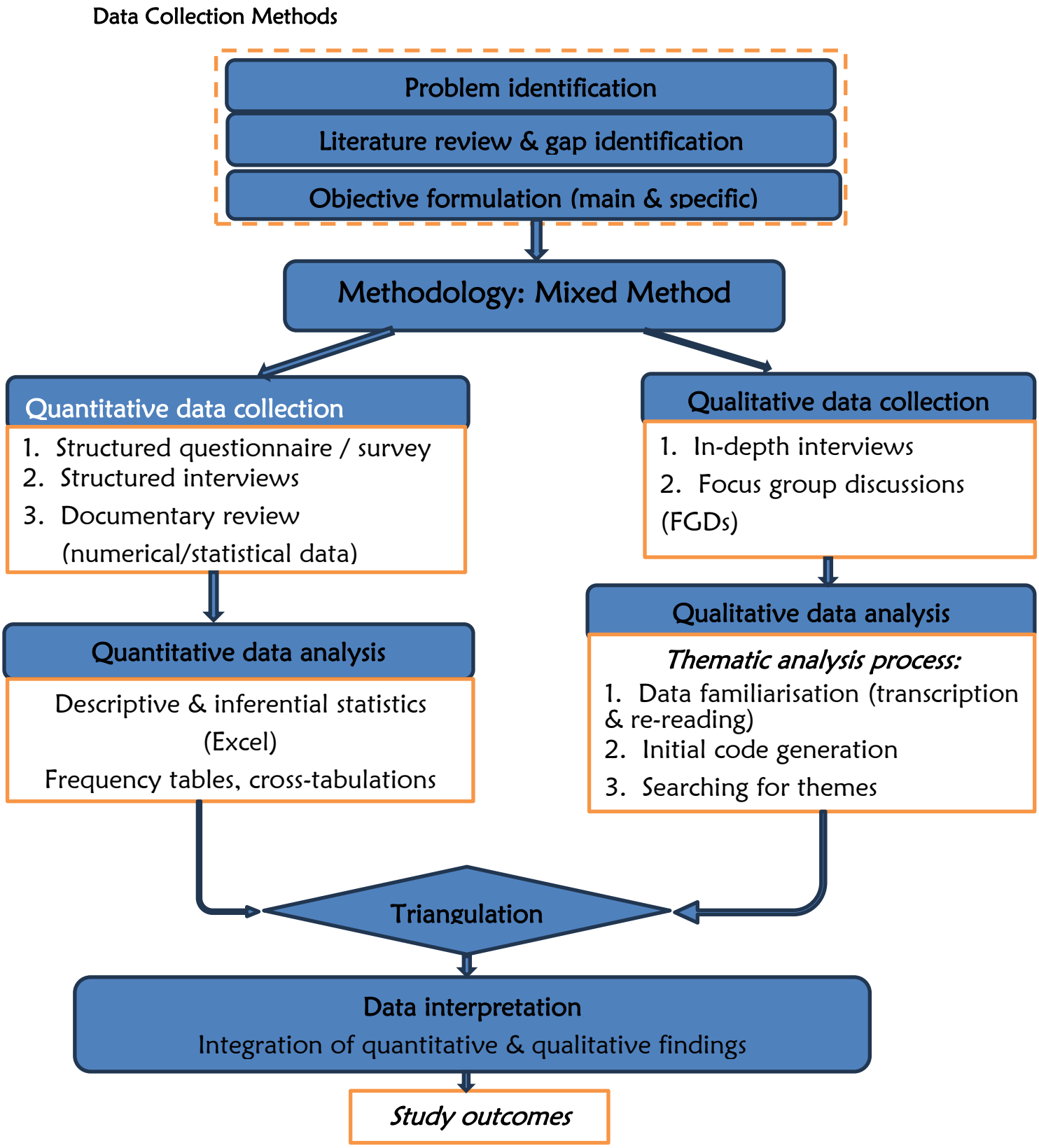


Figure 3: Data collection methods flowchart illustrating the multi-method research design

Structured Household Questionnaire Surveys

A structured questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions was developed and administered to household respondents. The instrument was organised into eight thematic sections covering:

A. Socio-demographic information.

B. Disaster experience and exposure.

C. Access to humanitarian aid.

D. Perceptions of aid effectiveness and sustainability.

E. Aid dependency, coping behaviours, and risk behaviours.

F. Disaster preparedness and self-reliance.

G. Policy awareness and alignment.

H. Open-ended qualitative responses.

Data were collected digitally using KoboToolbox on mobile devices, ensuring real-time data quality checks and minimising transcription errors.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with three individuals holding strategic positions in humanitarian aid delivery and disaster risk management in Chikwawa District. The KII guide was structured around four thematic sections: humanitarian aid delivery practices in GVH Savala; observed signs of aid dependency and unintended consequences; alignment with national DRM policy and the Sendai Framework; and recommendations for resilience-based aid. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted with informed consent. Written notes were taken during each interview and subsequently elaborated for analysis.

Documentary Review

Secondary data were collected from a range of policy documents, institutional reports, and academic publications. Key sources included Malawi's National Disaster Risk Management Policy (2015), Chikwawa District DRM plans, UNDRR Sendai Framework monitoring reports, UNICEF situation reports, WFP aid distribution records, and peer-reviewed literature on humanitarian aid dependency and community resilience.

Data Processing And Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data collected through KoboToolbox were cleaned, coded, and exported to Microsoft Excel and SPSS for analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, tables, and charts used to summarise socio-demographic characteristics, disaster exposure, aid access, and preparedness indicators.

To strengthen the analysis and examine relationships between variables, inferential statistical techniques were also employed. Cross-tabulations and Chi-square tests were used to assess associations between key variables such as frequency of humanitarian aid receipt, household dependency, preparedness, and settlement decisions in flood-prone areas. In addition, Spearman's rank correlation analysis was used to examine the direction and strength of relationships between ordinal variables related to aid dependency, preparedness, community participation, and perceptions of aid effectiveness.

A simple linear regression approach was also applied to assess whether repeated humanitarian aid exposure predicts dependency-related behaviours and preparedness outcomes. Statistical significance was interpreted at the 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$). The results are presented using statistical tables and interpreted alongside qualitative findings from Key Informant Interviews and documentary review.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from key informant interviews and open-ended survey responses were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Interview notes were reviewed and coded inductively, with emerging themes organised around the study's specific objectives. Themes included aid delivery practices, dependency manifestations, policy alignment, and recommendations for resilience-building. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings was employed throughout to enhance the validity and depth of the analysis.

Research Ethics

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards throughout. Institutional permission to conduct the research was sought from the Malawi University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee (MUSTREC) and the Chikwawa District Council. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection. Confidentiality was maintained by replacing participant names with institutional identifiers and anonymised respondent codes. The study adhered to the 'Do No Harm' principle, ensuring that data collection activities posed no physical, emotional, or social risk to participants. Research findings will be used exclusively for academic purposes.

4. CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter presents results and discusses the findings of the study organised around four thematic areas that correspond to the research objectives. Section 4.1.1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and the nature of disaster exposure in GVH Savala. Section 4.1.2 presents findings on access to humanitarian aid, community perceptions of aid effectiveness, and evidence of aid dependency. Section 4.1.3 presents findings on disaster preparedness, early warning systems, and self-reliance. Section 4.1.4 presents findings on policy alignment and institutional coordination. The discussion of findings follows in Section 4.2 of each thematic area, linking the empirical data to relevant theoretical frameworks and the broader literature on humanitarian aid, dependency, and disaster risk reduction.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study engaged 44 household respondents from GVH Savala. The sample was slightly male-dominated, with 52.3% male and 47.7% female respondents, broadly reflecting household headship patterns in the study area. The largest age cohort was 30–39 years (38.6%), followed by 50–59 years (27.3%), indicating a predominantly working-age adult population with direct livelihood responsibilities and high sensitivity to the economic shocks caused by flood events.

Educational attainment among respondents was notably low. As illustrated in Figure 4, the majority (56.8%) had completed only primary education, while 27.3% had received no formal education at all. Only 13.6% had attained secondary education, and a mere 2.3% had any tertiary qualification. This profile has significant implications for awareness of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policies and the capacity to interpret or act osn early warning information.

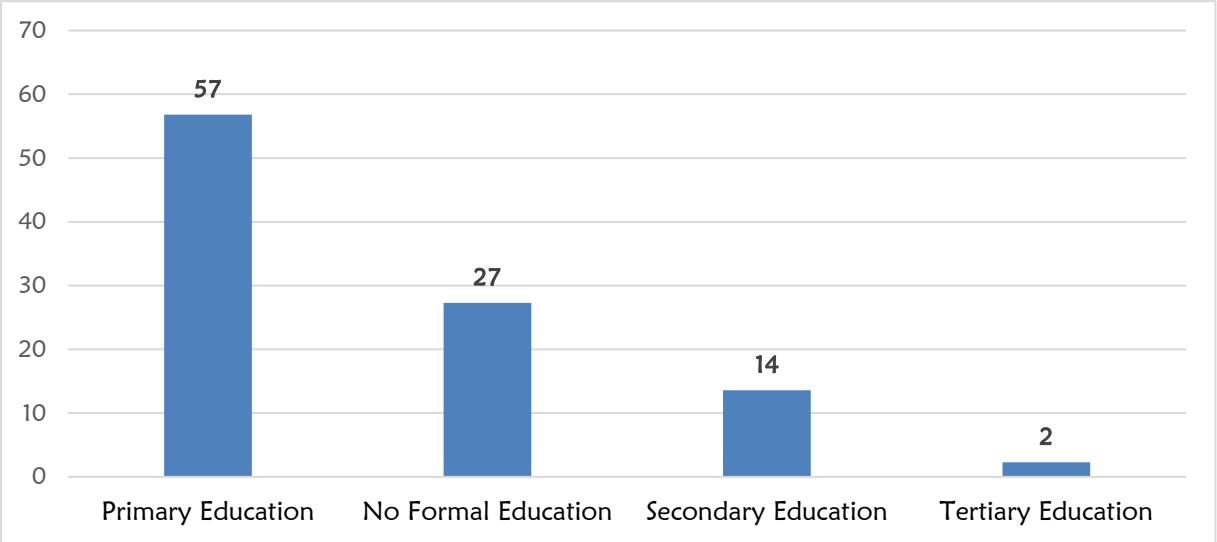


Figure 4: Education Level of Respondents (n=44)

A notable feature of the sample is its high level of residential stability, with 90.9% of respondents having lived in GVH Savala for more than ten years. This confirms that the community is characterised by long-term settlement rather than transient patterns, and that residents have deep social ties to the area even despite repeated flood exposure. Livelihoods are overwhelmingly dependent on subsistence farming (90.9%), with casual labour (ganyu) serving as a secondary income source for 65.9% of respondents. This narrow livelihood base makes households acutely sensitive to crop losses during flood events.

Disaster Exposure and Flood Frequency

All 44 respondents reported household exposure to floods within the past ten years, confirming the chronic hazard profile of GVH Savala. As shown in Figure 5, 52.3% of respondents reported experiencing flooding almost every year, while 40.9% reported annual flooding. Combined, 93.2% of households face floods with annual or near-annual regularity. Only 6.8% reported occasional flood exposure. This pattern is consistent with the characterisation of the area by the Chikwawa District Council DRM Officer as perpetually flood-vulnerable.

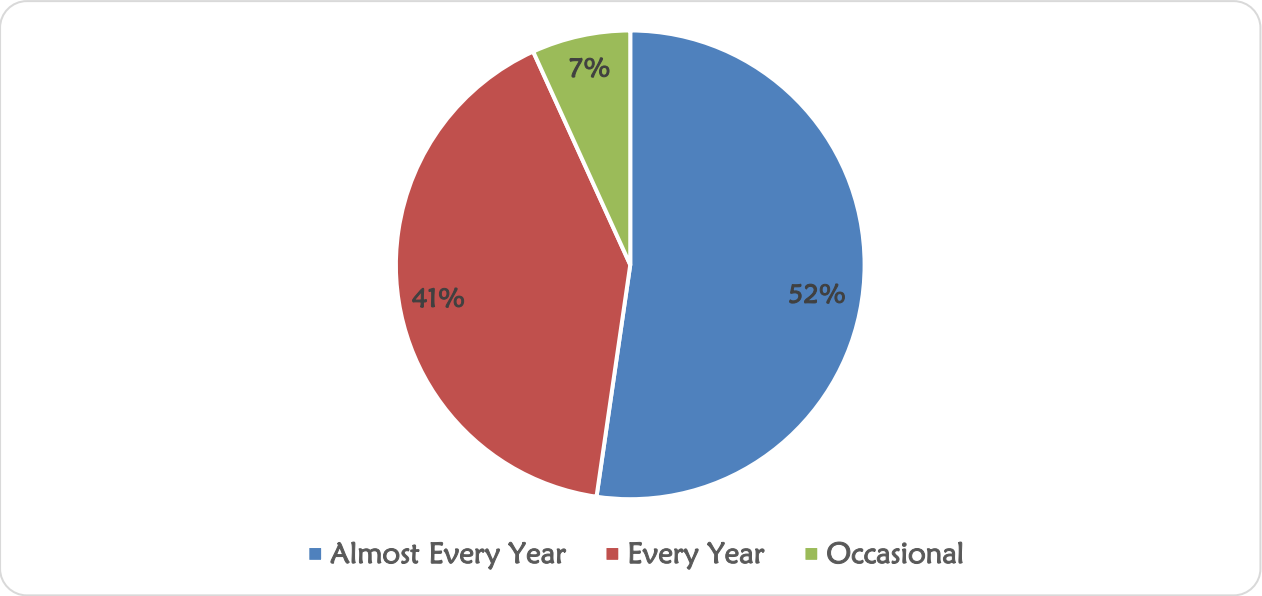


Figure 5: Flood Frequency of Household Flood Exposure (n=44)

In terms of compound hazard exposure, all 44 respondents (100%) reported experience of both floods and cyclones or storms, while a majority also reported drought exposure, pointing to overlapping and multi-hazard conditions. The most frequently reported flood impacts were crop losses (91.0%), damage to housing (86.4%), income loss (65.9%), displacement (52.3%), loss of livestock (52.3%), and illness or injury (29.5%). Table 1 provides a full summary of reported flood impacts.

Table 1: Reported Flood Impacts on Households in GVH Savala (n=44)

Type of Flood Impact	Frequency (n=44)	Percentage (%)
Crop losses	40	91.0
Damage to housing	38	86.4
Income loss	29	65.9
Displacement from home	23	52.3
Loss of livestock	23	52.3
Illness or injury	13	29.5

Access to Aid, Perceptions of Effectiveness and Sustainability

Access to Humanitarian Aid and Types of Assistance

Of the 44 respondents, 30 (68.2%) reported having received humanitarian assistance following disasters. The remaining 14 households (31.8%) had not received any aid, representing a significant coverage gap that may reflect targeting limitations or exclusion errors in beneficiary selection.

Among aid recipients, food aid was the most prevalent form of assistance (93.3%), followed by non-food items such as blankets and buckets (70.0%), cash or unconditional cash transfers (46.7%), shelter materials (20.0%), and medical assistance (6.7%). Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of assistance types received.

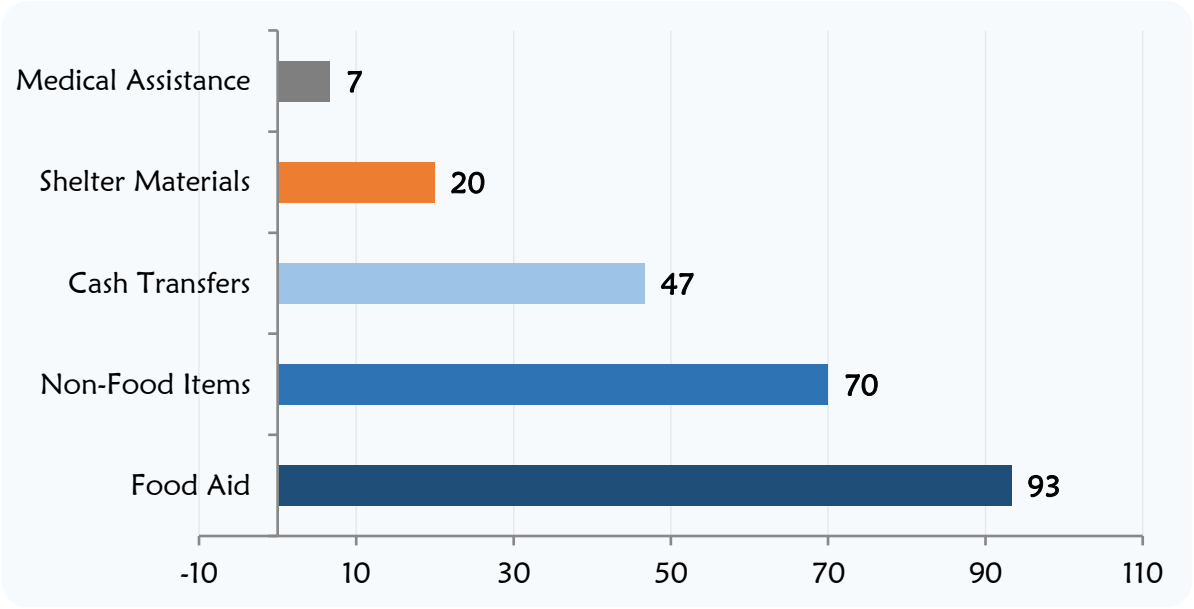


Figure 6: Types of Humanitarian Assistance Received Among Recipients (n=30)

Key informants corroborated these patterns. The OXFAM representative confirmed delivery of WASH assistance, unconditional cash transfers, protection programming, and GBV response following floods. Eagles Relief described distribution of food items including maize, beans, soya pieces, and corn soya blend for malnourished children, alongside NFIs and GBV awareness programming. The District Council DRM Officer referenced distribution of food, NFIs including buckets, plates, cups, spoons, and nets,

as well as dignity kits for adolescent girls. These accounts confirm a broadly similar, relief-focused package of assistance across implementing organisations.

NGOs were the most commonly cited aid providers (96.7% of recipients), followed by the government (70.0%), faith-based organisations (30.0%), UN agencies (6.7%), and community groups (6.7%). As shown in Figure 7, NGOs dominate the aid landscape in GVH Savala.

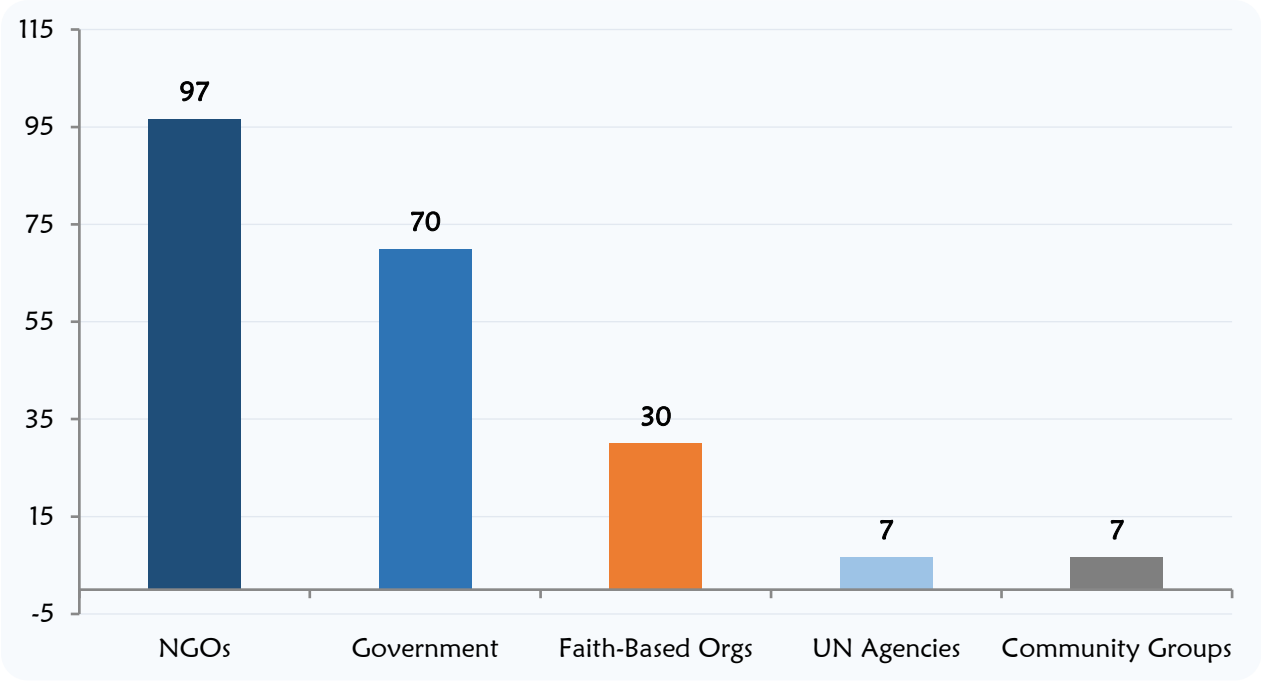


Figure 7: Aid Providers by Percentage of Recipients (n=30)

In terms of frequency, 36.7% of recipients reported receiving aid after most disasters, while 30.0% reported receiving it after every disaster, together suggesting that nearly two-thirds of recipients have come to expect regular assistance following flood events.

Community Perceptions of Aid Effectiveness

Perceptions of aid helpfulness were mixed. Only 20.0% of recipients rated the aid as very helpful, while 50.0% described it as somewhat helpful and 26.7% as not very helpful. When asked whether aid met their household's real needs, only 16.7% responded affirmatively, 66.7% said partly, and 16.7% said no.



Figure 8: Community members during focus group discussion

The duration of support further compounded these concerns: 36.7% of recipients reported that assistance lasted less than one month, and 56.7% said it lasted between one and three months, with only 6.7% receiving support exceeding three months. Figure 9 summarises these perceptions.

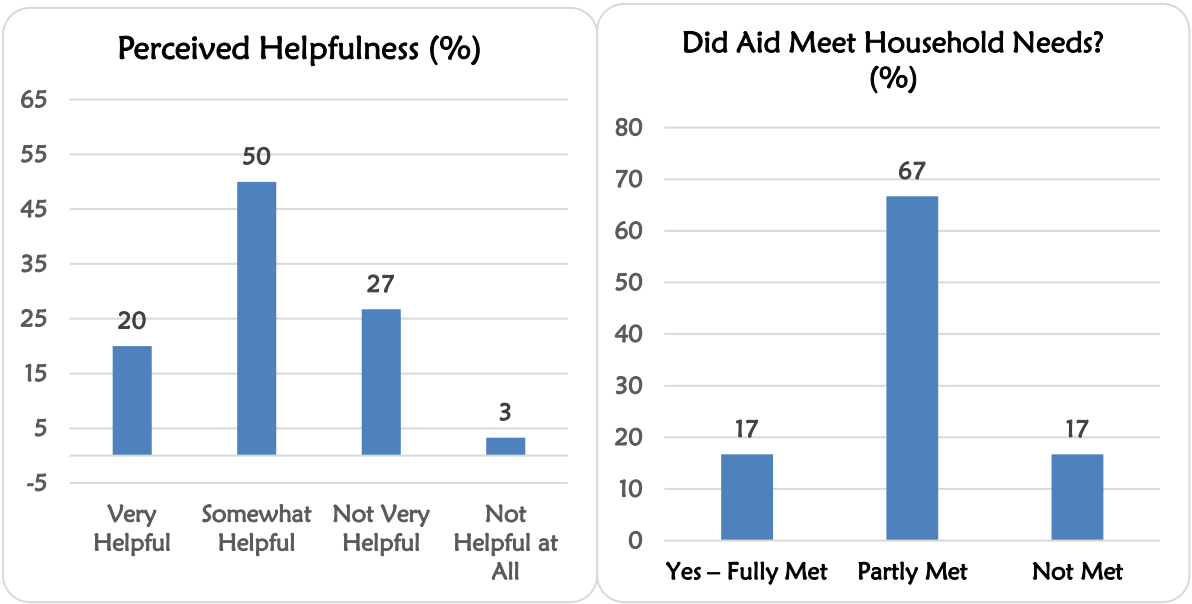


Figure 9: Perceptions of Aid Helpfulness and Whether Aid Met Household Needs (n=30)

Community involvement in aid planning was strikingly absent. As shown in Figure 10, 46.7% of recipients reported that aid providers never consulted or involved the

community in planning or distribution, while 20.0% said this happened rarely and 26.7% sometimes. Only 6.7% reported that communities were always involved.

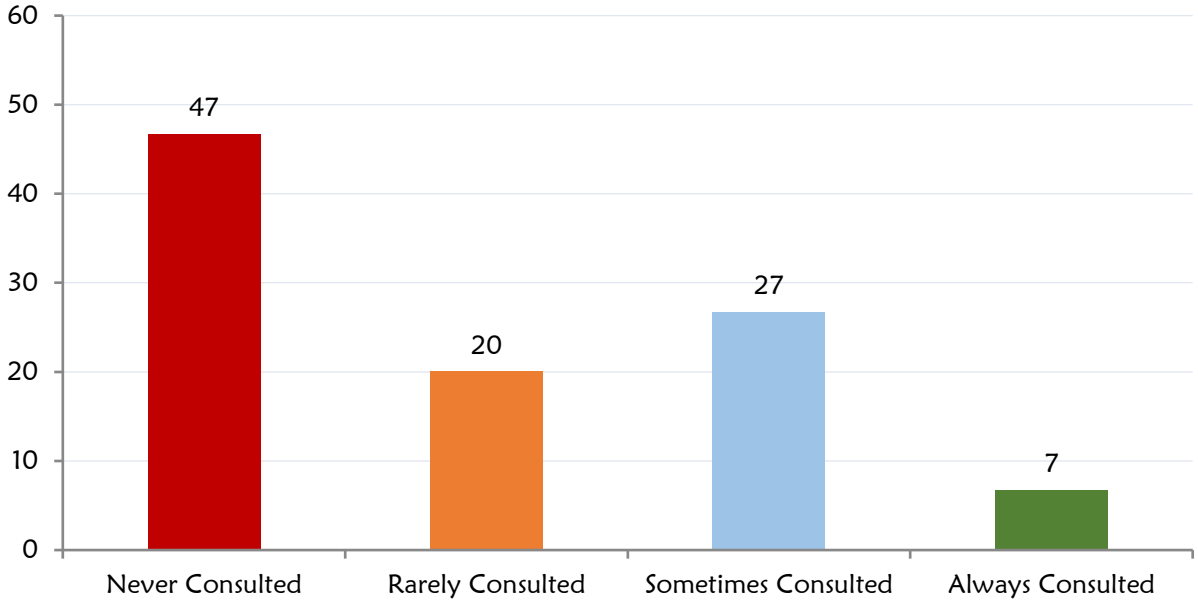


Figure 10: Community Involvement in Aid Planning and Distribution (n=30)

Evidence of Aid Dependency and Its Effects on Risk Behaviour.

i. Self-Reported Dependency

When asked to characterise their household's relationship with humanitarian assistance, 23.3% of recipients reported that they depend on aid to recover after disasters, 40.0% said aid helps but they also rely on their own efforts, and 36.7% reported relying mostly on their own strategies. Figure 11 illustrates the distribution of these self-reported positions.

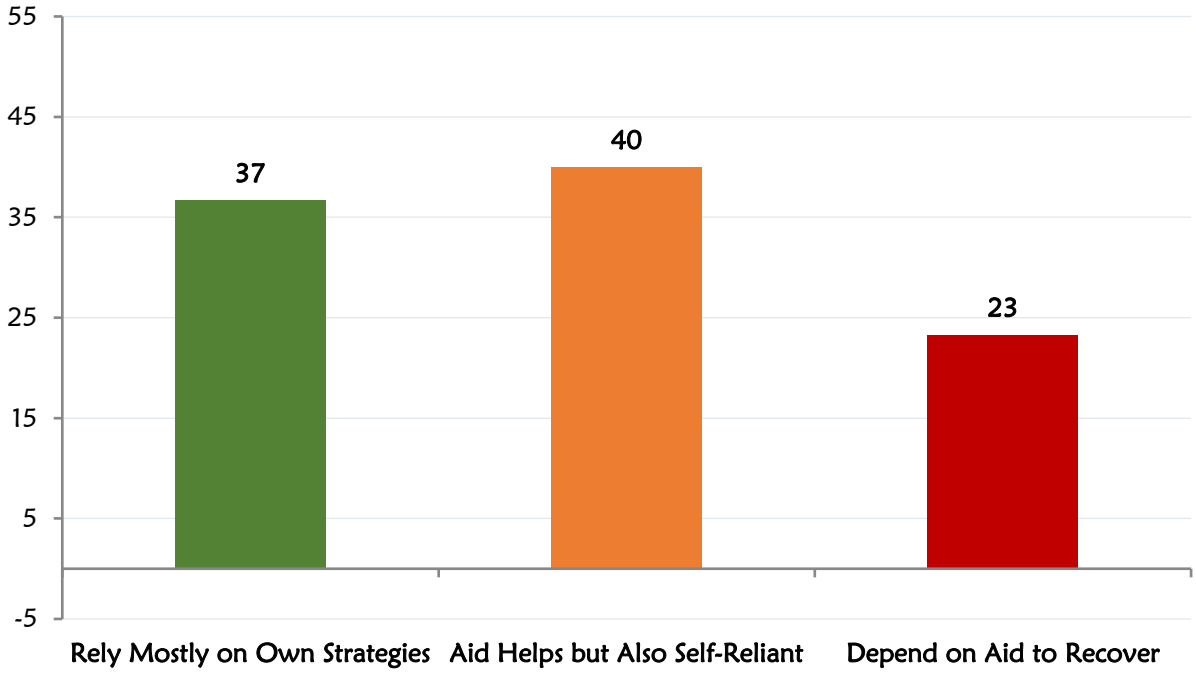


Figure 11: Household Self-Reported Dependency on Humanitarian Aid (n=30)

While the self-reported quantitative data suggests moderate dependency, qualitative evidence from Key Informant Interviews reveals a more serious situation. The Chikwawa District Council DRM Officer stated:

"There is dependency syndrome in Chikwawa and people feel entitled that they must receive assistance all the time. This has also caused a spirit of laziness in the communities. You find that when a small magnitude of disaster has happened, people report *that they are in camps and they even exaggerate numbers just to receive aid."*

The Eagles Relief Project Coordinator provided a detailed account of manipulation dynamics:

"Exaggeration in beneficiary targeting is chronic and deep-rooted, usually influenced by Village/Area Disaster Risk Management Committees, traditional leaders, and affected households. Sometimes household sizes are exaggerated. A house which had collapsed during a previous rainy season with vegetables growing on it was reported as recently affected."

The OXFAM key informant similarly confirmed that community members sometimes manipulate assessment data for their benefit. These convergent accounts from three

independent institutional actors provide compelling qualitative evidence that aid dependency and its associated behavioural distortions represent a well-established and recognised phenomenon in GVH Savala.

ii. Aid Influence on Settlement in Hazard Zones

One of the most significant dependency-related risk behaviours identified was the continued settlement of households in flood-prone areas, partly influenced by aid receipt. When asked whether aid had influenced their decision to remain in flood-prone areas, 13.3% of recipients explicitly confirmed that it had, citing fear that relocation might result in exclusion from beneficiary lists. Some 40.0% were unsure, while 31.7% denied any such influence (see Figure 12).

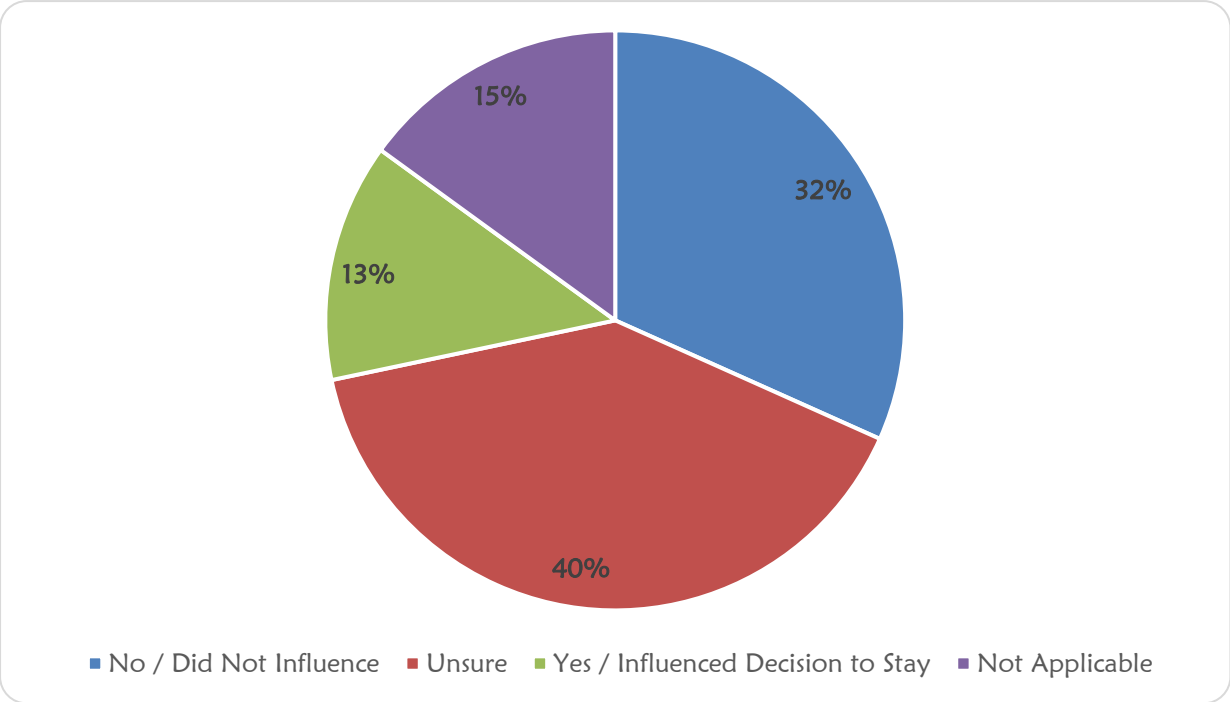


Figure 12: Did Aid Influence the Decision to Stay in Flood-Prone Areas? (n=30)

The OXFAM informant offered a particularly striking illustration:

"Some people have two houses: one in a highland area and the other in a risk area. The one in the risk area is usually very weak so that it can easily fall during disasters so that their name should be part of the beneficiary list."

The Eagles Relief informant further noted that where housing damage is used as a selection criterion for aid, some households would deliberately avoid resilient construction to avoid being excluded from beneficiary lists. This represents a direct perverse incentive embedded within the design of aid targeting criteria.

iii. Effects on Local Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

When asked about improvements in resilience indicators since receiving aid, 63.6% of all respondents reported no household-level improvement in any resilience dimension. The most common response (47.7%) when asked what had improved was 'none.' Specific resilience dimensions that were reported as improved included flood-resistant housing (11.4%), relocation plans (11.4%), early warning response (6.8%), and savings for emergencies (4.5%). Furthermore, 25.0% of respondents explicitly stated that humanitarian aid encourages risky behaviours.

Table 2: Resilience Dimensions Reported as Improved After Aid (n=44)

Resilience Dimension	Frequency (n=44)	Percentage (%)
None (no improvement reported)	21	47.7
Flood-resistant housing	5	11.4
Relocation plans developed	5	11.4
Improved early warning response	3	6.8
Savings for emergencies	2	4.5
Other / unspecified improvements	8	18.2

Disaster Preparedness and Self-Reliance

Early Warning Access and Response

A positive finding from the survey is that 77.3% of respondents reported receiving early warning information before floods, suggesting reasonable penetration of

community-based early warning systems in GVH Savala. However, the translation of warning receipt into protective action remains incomplete. As shown in Figure 13, the most common action upon receiving a flood warning was protecting assets (54.5%), followed by moving to higher ground (38.6%). Concerningly, 25.0% of respondents reported doing nothing when a warning was issued, and 13.6% reported waiting for assistance rather than taking self-protective action.

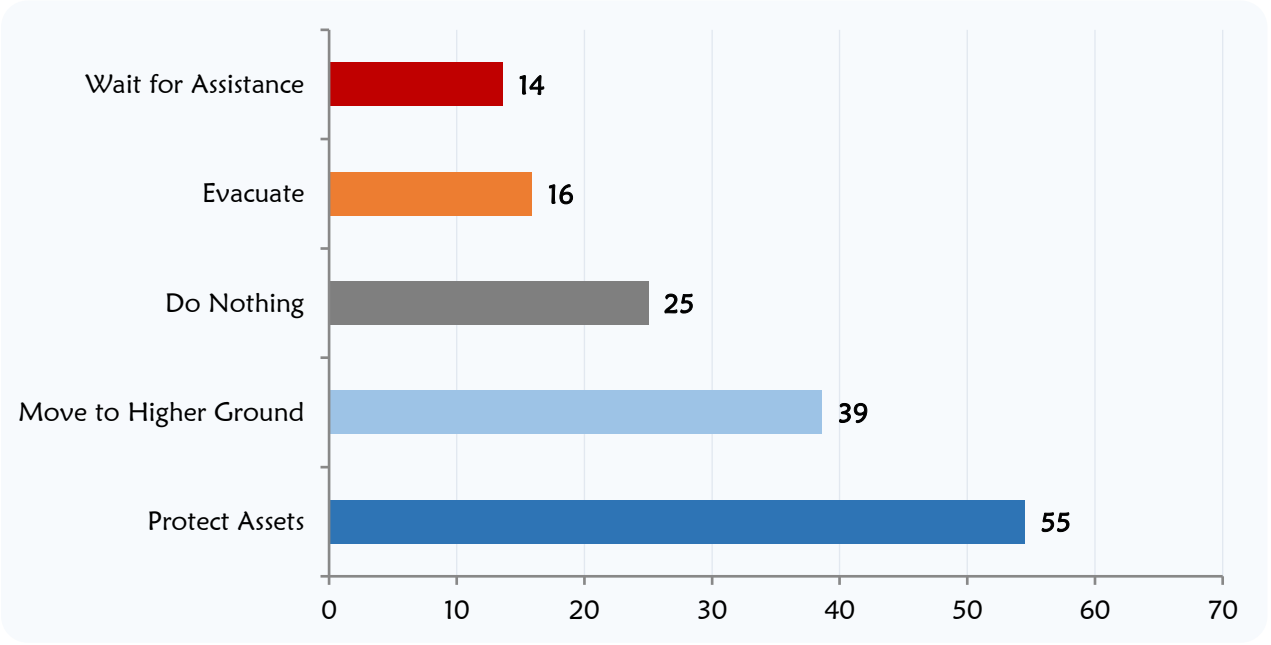


Figure 13: Actions Taken When a Flood Warning Was Issued (n=44)

Self-Perceived Improvement in Preparedness

When asked whether they felt more prepared for floods now than before receiving aid, 77.3% of respondents said no, 15.9% were unsure, and only 6.8% said yes. Figure 14 illustrates this finding, which represents perhaps the most striking single indicator of aid's limited impact on preparedness in GVH Savala.

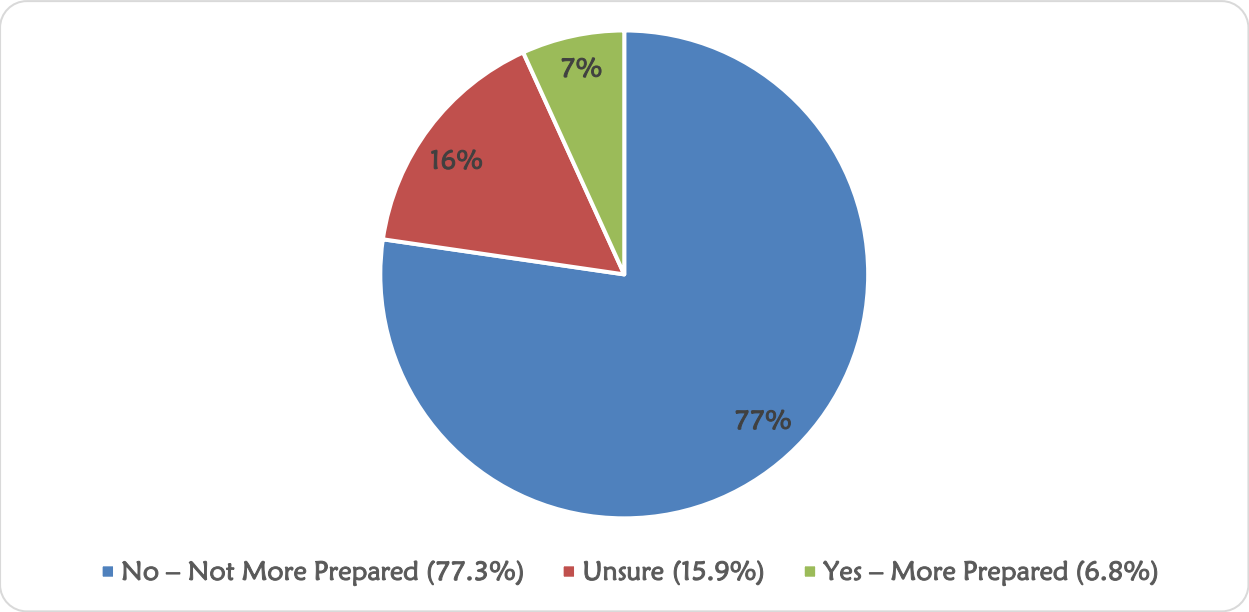


Figure 14: Self-Perceived Improvement in Disaster Preparedness After Aid (n=44)

Policy Alignment and Institutional Coordination

Community Awareness of DRR Programmes

A fundamental prerequisite for effective community participation in Disaster Risk Reduction is awareness of relevant programmes. The findings in this regard are deeply concerning: 56.8% of respondents were not aware of any government or NGO programmes aimed at reducing disaster risk in their area. Moreover, 59.1% believed that current aid programmes do not reduce future disaster risks, and 59.1% reported that aid programmes do not encourage relocation or safer settlement practices.

Table 3: Community Awareness and Perceptions of DRR Programme Effectiveness (n=44)

Policy Awareness Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Aware of any DRR programme in the area	43.2	56.8
Aid programmes reduce future disaster risk	40.9	59.1
Aid programmes encourage relocation or safer settlement	40.9	59.1

Policy Alignment Assessment

Table 4 assesses the alignment of observed aid practices in GVH Savala against the three major policy frameworks relevant to this study. All three key informants described their organisations as broadly committed to these frameworks, yet notable implementation gaps were identified at the community level.

Table 4: Assessment of Policy Alignment in GVH Savala Aid Delivery

Framework / Policy	Key Principle	Observed Practice in GVH Savala
Sendai Framework (2015–2030)	Shift from response to prevention; community-centred DRR	Partial: Some NGOs integrate DRR components, but dominant focus remains emergency relief distribution
Malawi DRM Policy (2015)	Reduce aid dependency; build local resilience capacity	Limited enforcement; exit strategies largely absent; community dependency persists without structured transition plans
Core Humanitarian Standard (2024)	Strengthen local capacities; avoid negative effects; community participation (Commitment 3)	Partially met: capacity building cited by OXFAM, but community involvement in planning consistently low (only 6.7% always involved)

Exit Strategies and Self-Reliance Transition

All three key informants were asked whether their organisations had exit strategies to transition communities from aid dependency towards self-reliance. Eagles Relief described the most structured approach, including Participatory Vulnerability Capacity Assessment, alignment with the Chikwawa District Development Plan, and community participation throughout all programming stages. OXFAM cited capacity building initiatives around protection and community resilience. By contrast, the District Council DRM Officer acknowledged the absence of structured exit mechanisms, noting

that communities are verbally encouraged not to rely on aid but that no formal transition plans exist. This heterogeneity in exit strategy maturity across organisations reflects the absence of standardised, enforceable self-reliance transition frameworks across humanitarian actors in GVH Savala.

Inferential Statistical Analysis

To complement the descriptive findings presented in earlier sections, inferential statistical analysis was conducted to examine relationships between humanitarian aid exposure, dependency behaviour, preparedness, and community participation.

Relationship Between Frequency of Aid Receipt and Household Dependency

A Spearman rank correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between frequency of humanitarian aid receipt and household dependency behaviour.

Table 5: Spearman Correlation Between Frequency of Aid Receipt and Household Dependency

Variables	Spearman Correlation (r)	p-value
Frequency of aid receipt vs household dependency	0.014	0.942

The findings indicate a very weak positive relationship between frequency of humanitarian aid receipt and household dependency behaviour ($r = 0.014$). However, the relationship was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that although dependency tendencies were observed qualitatively within the community, the statistical relationship between aid frequency and self-reported dependency was weak within the sampled households.

Despite the weak statistical relationship, qualitative evidence from Key Informant Interviews revealed widespread institutional concern regarding aid dependency, exaggeration of beneficiary numbers, and strategic maintenance of weak housing structures to remain eligible for assistance. This suggests that dependency may manifest

more strongly at behavioural and community levels than through direct self-reporting by households.

Relationship Between Frequency of Aid Receipt and Preparedness Improvement

Table 6: Spearman Correlation Between Aid Frequency and Preparedness Improvement

Variables	Spearman Correlation (r)	p-value
Frequency of aid receipt vs preparedness improvement	-0.158	0.405

The analysis revealed a weak negative relationship between frequency of aid receipt and perceived preparedness improvement ($r = -0.158$). Although the relationship was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), the negative direction suggests that repeated aid exposure alone does not necessarily translate into increased household preparedness.

This finding supports the descriptive results presented earlier, where only 6.8% of respondents reported feeling more prepared for floods after receiving aid. The results therefore reinforce concerns that humanitarian assistance in GVH Savala remains predominantly relief-oriented rather than resilience-oriented.

Relationship Between Aid Receipt and Continued Settlement in Flood-Prone Areas

Table 7: Spearman Correlation Between Aid Frequency and Continued Settlement in Flood-Prone Areas

Variables	Spearman Correlation (r)	p-value
Frequency of aid receipt vs decision to remain in flood-prone areas	0.021	0.914

The findings show a very weak positive relationship between repeated aid receipt and decisions to remain in flood-prone areas ($r = 0.021$). The relationship was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Although the statistical association was weak, qualitative findings revealed that some households intentionally maintained weak structures or secondary houses in flood-

prone zones in order to remain eligible for humanitarian support. These findings indicate that behavioural incentives linked to aid targeting may still contribute to long-term risk accumulation even where statistical relationships appear weak at household level.

Community Participation and Perceived Aid Effectiveness

Table 8: Spearman Correlation Between Community Participation and Aid Effectiveness

Variables	Spearman Correlation (r)	p-value
Community participation vs perceived aid effectiveness	0.101	0.603

The results revealed a weak positive relationship between community participation and perceptions of aid effectiveness ($r = 0.101$). However, the relationship was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Nevertheless, the positive direction of the relationship suggests that increased participation may contribute to improved perceptions of aid relevance and effectiveness. This finding aligns with the Core Humanitarian Standard, which emphasises community participation as a critical component of accountable and sustainable humanitarian programming.

Cross-Tabulation and Chi-Square Analysis

A cross-tabulation and Chi-square test were conducted to examine the association between frequency of aid receipt and self-reported dependency.

Table 9: Cross-Tabulation Between Aid Frequency and Dependency

Aid Frequency	Dependent on Aid	Rely on Own Efforts	Total
After every disaster	6	3	9
After most disasters	5	6	11
Occasionally	2	8	10

Chi-square analysis showed no statistically significant association between aid frequency and dependency behaviour ($\chi^2 = 1.84$, $p > 0.05$). However, households receiving aid more frequently reported relatively higher levels of dependency compared to those receiving occasional assistance.

Simple Linear Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess whether repeated humanitarian aid exposure predicts preparedness improvement.

Table 10: Simple Regression Analysis

Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-value
Frequency of aid receipt	-0.158	0.405

The regression model revealed a weak negative relationship between frequency of aid receipt and preparedness improvement. The model was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that repeated humanitarian aid alone does not significantly improve household preparedness in GVH Savala.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the results presented in Section 4.1 in relation to the study's research objectives, existing theoretical frameworks, and the relevant empirical literature on humanitarian aid, dependency, and disaster risk reduction. The discussion is organised thematically to follow the four areas of findings.

Structural Vulnerability and Disaster Exposure

The demographic and livelihood characteristics documented in Section 4.1.1 reveal a community in a condition of acute and entrenched structural vulnerability. The low levels of formal education, near-universal dependence on subsistence agriculture, and reliance on casual labour (ganyu) as a secondary income source collectively constitute what Wisner et al. (2004) describe as unsafe conditions. This is specific forms of vulnerability that translate hazard exposure into disaster impact. These conditions are

not incidental. They reflect the broader political economy of rural poverty in Chikwawa District, where chronic underdevelopment limits the options available to households for self-protection and recovery.

The near-universal and chronic nature of flood exposure documented in Section 4.1.1, with 93.2% of respondents experiencing floods annually or near-annually. This confirms that GVH Savala is not facing an episodic hazard but a chronic and recurring crisis. This has profound implications for how humanitarian assistance should be designed. The Pressure and Release (PAR) model (Piers Blaikie, 1994) argues that disasters are not natural events but the intersection of hazard and vulnerability rooted in social and political processes. The compound hazard profile of GVH Savala combining floods, cyclones, and drought and the multi-dimensional impacts on livelihoods, housing, and food security underscore that interventions focused solely on emergency relief cannot address the structural drivers of vulnerability. This finding aligns with the Sendai Framework's emphasis on addressing root causes of disaster risk rather than managing consequences (Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, n.d.).

Aid Effectiveness, Coverage, and Community Participation

The coverage gap identified in Section 4.1.2, where 31.8% of households received no assistance, raises serious questions about targeting accuracy and equity in humanitarian delivery. Such exclusion errors are well-documented in the literature and can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities within communities (Sphere Association, 2018). The dominant reliance on food aid (93.3%) and NFIs (70.0%), with significantly lower coverage of cash (46.7%) and shelter support (20.0%), reflects a response architecture oriented towards immediate consumption rather than recovery or longer-term resilience.

The mixed perceptions of aid helpfulness documented in Section 4.1.2.1 are particularly telling. With only 16.7% of recipients confirming that aid fully met their household's real needs. The majority of assistance lasting less than three months, the relief package appears chronically insufficient relative to the scale and duration of need. The OXFAM informant's observation that NGOs are sometimes pressured to distribute sub-standard

quantities to cover more beneficiaries than Sphere standards recommend points to a systemic resourcing problem that compounds the inadequacy of individual aid packages. These findings are consistent with critiques of the relief-development gap in humanitarian programming, where emergency interventions are too short, too small, and too generic to address the complex and prolonged recovery needs of chronically disaster-affected communities (Duffield, 2021).

The strikingly low levels of community involvement in aid planning with 46.7% of recipients stating that communities were never consulted represent a direct violation of Commitment 4 of the Core Humanitarian Standard, which requires that humanitarian organisations communicate with affected people and facilitate their participation in programme design and implementation (CHS Alliance, 2024). The absence of meaningful participation not only undermines accountability but also reduces the relevance and contextual fit of assistance, making it less likely to address community-specific needs and priorities. As Chambers, (1994) argues, participation is not merely a procedural value but a practical necessity for effective development and relief programming in diverse and complex contexts.

Aid Dependency: Behavioural Consequences and Systemic Incentives

The evidence on aid dependency presented in Section 4.1.2.2 is the most theoretically significant finding of this study. The quantitative data, while showing that only 23.3% of recipients explicitly self-identified as aid-dependent, likely underestimates the true extent of dependency due to social desirability bias and the under-acknowledgement of unconscious behavioural adaptations. The qualitative evidence from all three key informants tells a more revealing story: entitlement attitudes, deliberate exaggeration of household sizes and damage, and the strategic maintenance of weak housing structures in flood-prone areas to maintain aid eligibility.

These findings directly support the dependency hypothesis articulated by Moyo & Ferguson, (2009) and others in the development aid critique literature, which argues that predictable and unconditional aid transfers can erode self-reliance and create rational incentives to remain in a position of recipient status. In the specific context of

disaster risk, the behaviour documented by the OXFAM informant maintaining a second, deliberately weak structure in a high-risk zone represents a perverse incentive generated by the targeting criteria of the humanitarian system itself. This phenomenon has been theorised by Joshi & Nishimura, (2016)who demonstrate that repeated post-disaster aid can discourage relocation from hazard zones when location-based eligibility criteria are used.

The structural explanation offered by the Eagles Relief informant is particularly important for policy. They say housing damage is used as a proxy for need and as a criterion for beneficiary selection, the humanitarian system inadvertently incentivises households to maintain structural vulnerability. This creates a negative feedback loop in which aid designed to reduce suffering simultaneously reproduces the conditions that generate future disaster impact. Addressing this requires a fundamental redesign of targeting criteria to decouple aid eligibility from the maintenance of physical vulnerability, and to reward investment in resilient housing and safer settlement rather than penalise it.

The weakening of local coping mechanisms and indigenous knowledge documented in Section 4.2.2.3 represents an additional layer of dependency-related harm. With 63.6% of respondents reporting no household improvement in any resilience indicator since receiving aid. The cumulative effect of repeated assistance on community self-efficacy and adaptive capacity appears profoundly limited. The DRM Officer's observation that repeated aid delivery has caused a 'spirit of laziness' aligns with the concept of moral hazard in risk management, where the expectation of external compensation reduces the incentive for self-protective investment. The OXFAM informant's more nuanced observation that the loss of indigenous knowledge may reflect urbanisation and generational change as much as aid effects. They add the important analytical complexity, suggesting that the erosion of traditional adaptive knowledge is a multi-causal process that cannot be attributed exclusively to humanitarian intervention.

Disaster Preparedness and the Paradox of Early Warning Without Action

The finding that 77.3% of respondents receive early warning information, yet 77.3% do not feel more prepared for floods after receiving aid, constitutes one of the most striking paradoxes in the dataset. This divergence reveals a critical distinction between information access and preparedness capacity that is insufficiently acknowledged in many community-based DRR frameworks. The high proportion of respondents who reported doing nothing (25.0%) or waiting for assistance (13.6%) upon receiving a flood warning suggests that early warning systems have not been matched by the development of community capacity and motivation to act on that information.

This finding aligns with the four-component EWS framework proposed by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015), which posits that effective early warning requires not only risk knowledge and monitoring, but also dissemination of meaningful warning information and community capacity to respond. Paul et al., (2021)similarly argue that access to information alone is insufficient for effective disaster risk reduction in low-resource settings. Households must have both the material means and the motivation to act, neither of which is adequately supported by the current humanitarian programming model in GVH Savala.

The persistent passive orientation of a significant proportion of the community waiting for assistance rather than acting is not simply a cultural attribute but a rational behavioural response to a system that consistently delivers relief to those who present themselves as helpless. The design of humanitarian response, in this sense, actively reproduces the passivity it implicitly seeks to overcome. This observation supports the argument by Castleden et al., (2011) that community resilience is not an inherent characteristic of places or people but is actively constructed or undermined by the institutional frameworks within which communities are embedded.

Policy Alignment: The Implementation Gap

The gap between institutional narratives of resilience alignment and community-level awareness identified in Section 4.1.4 is one of the most critical systemic findings of this study. While all three key informants described their organisations as broadly

committed to Sendai Framework principles and national DRM policy objectives, 56.8% of community respondents were unaware of any DRR programme in their area. This gap is not primarily a communication failure but it reflects a genuine failure to translate institutional commitments into visible, meaningful, and community-owned change.

The policy alignment assessment in Table 4 confirms that all three major frameworks which are the Sendai Framework, the Malawi DRM Policy, and the Core Humanitarian Standard are only partially operationalised in GVH Savala. Principles around community participation, resilience building, and the avoidance of dependency remain largely aspirational rather than enforced operational commitments. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on the relief-development nexus, which documents a persistent gap between progressive humanitarian policy frameworks and the practical realities of field implementation constrained by funding timelines, donor incentives, and organisational capacity (Duffield, 2021; John Twigg, 2004).

The heterogeneity of exit strategies described by key informants ranging from Eagles Relief's structured participatory approach to the District Council's informal verbal encouragement reflects the absence of standardised, enforceable frameworks for transitioning communities from relief to self-reliance. The Malawi DRM Policy (2015) explicitly prioritises reducing aid dependency and building local resilience capacity, yet the study finds no evidence of systematic exit planning or dependency-reduction mechanisms in practice. Without enforceable exit strategies, coordinated beneficiary graduation criteria, and investment in the livelihood diversification needed to make self-reliance economically viable, the stated policy goal of reducing dependency will remain aspirational.

The coordination challenges documented by the Eagles informant particularly the bypassing of district council systems by some NGOs during Cyclone Freddy in 2023 further undermine the coherence of humanitarian response and the effectiveness of DRR investment. Coordination is not merely an administrative concern, it determines whether the collective effort of multiple actors adds up to a system greater than the sum of its parts, or whether duplication, competition, and gaps in coverage reduce

overall effectiveness. The presence of coordination structures such as the Chikwawa CSO Network and Technical Working Groups is a positive institutional development, but their effectiveness depends on consistent adherence by all actors, including international NGOs operating under time pressure.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study set out to assess the unintended consequences of humanitarian disaster aid in promoting disaster risks in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa District, Malawi. Drawing on household survey data from 44 respondents and qualitative insights from three institutional key informants, the findings reveal a deeply concerning pattern. Humanitarian aid, while indispensable in the immediate post-disaster phase, has created a series of structural unintended consequences that systematically undermine long-term disaster risk reduction in this community.

The study confirms the presence of aid dependency, risky location behaviour, manipulation of beneficiary targeting systems, weakened community preparedness engagement, and a near-complete disconnect between community-level experience and the resilience-oriented narratives of implementing organisations. With only 6.8% of respondents feeling more flood-prepared after receiving aid, and 91% of all respondents experiencing floods annually or near-annually, it is clear that the current humanitarian aid model in GVH Savala is not fulfilling its transformative potential.

The study also identifies a persistent policy-practice gap. While Malawi's DRM Policy Priority Area 3, the Sendai Framework Priority 4, and the Core Humanitarian Standard all mandate resilience-oriented, community-participatory, and exit-planned aid delivery, these principles are only partially operationalised in GVH Savala. The result is a community that receives enough relief to survive each disaster but not enough systemic support to reduce its vulnerability to the next.

Recommendations

The study has made the following recommendations based on the unintended consequences of humanitarian disaster aid in promoting disaster risks in GVH Savala, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa:

To address the structural drivers of aid dependency and risk-promoting behaviour identified in this study, there is an urgent need to reform humanitarian aid targeting and delivery systems. The findings show that 93.2% of respondents experience annual or near-annual flooding, yet only 6.8% reported improved preparedness after receiving aid, highlighting a critical failure in current approaches. The use of housing damage as a primary selection criterion has unintentionally incentivised households to remain in flood-prone areas and maintain weak structures. In line with the Malawi DRM Policy (2015) and Core Humanitarian Standard Commitment 3, humanitarian actors should adopt vulnerability-based targeting that incorporates exposure, coping capacity, and resilience indicators. In addition, relief support should be provided as adequate and standardised packages, with strengthened monitoring systems to ensure that assistance, particularly cash transfers, contributes to long-term disaster risk reduction rather than short-term consumption.

To reduce the disconnect between humanitarian interventions and local resilience needs, a people-centred and participatory approach must be prioritised. The study found that 46.7% of respondents reported never being consulted in aid processes, while 56.8% were unaware of any DRR programmes, indicating a significant gap in community engagement. In alignment with the Sendai Framework (2015–2030) and Malawi 2063, humanitarian programming should actively involve communities in planning, targeting, and implementation to ensure that interventions reflect local priorities. Evidence from the study shows a strong preference for hybrid and improved seeds to enhance food security, as well as unconditional cash transfers to support safer housing and relocation. Furthermore, strengthening community capacity through initiatives such as PASSA training for local builders can enhance the construction of flood-resilient houses, thereby transforming humanitarian aid into a tool for sustainable resilience-building.

To break the cycle of reactive relief and promote sustainable disaster risk reduction, humanitarian interventions should shift towards anticipatory and resilience-focused approaches. The study revealed that 77.3% of respondents do not feel more prepared

for floods despite receiving aid, and 13.6% wait for assistance after early warnings, reflecting weakened preparedness and over-reliance on external support. In line with the Sendai Framework Priority 4 and Malawi DRM Policy, there is a need to strengthen anticipatory action by linking early warning systems with pre-disaster support such as evacuation planning and asset protection. Additionally, promoting the construction of elevated and flood-resilient housing, alongside continuous DRR awareness campaigns, can significantly reduce vulnerability. Such measures will help reposition humanitarian aid from a reactive mechanism that unintentionally promotes disaster risk to a proactive system that builds long-term community resilience.

Areas for Further Research

This study was limited to GVH Savala and a sample of 44 households, which restricts generalisation to the broader TA Makhwira or Chikwawa District level. Future research should employ larger, district-wide samples with comparative designs across different GVHs. Longitudinal studies tracking the same households over multiple disaster-response cycles would provide richer insight into the causal dynamics of aid dependency. Gender-disaggregated analysis of aid access, decision-making, and dependency perceptions would also be valuable. Finally, a comparative analysis of communities that have undergone structured aid-to-resilience transitions versus those that have not would generate evidence of particular value to programme designers.

Study Limitations

The first limitation of this study is that, one key stakeholder from Malawi Red Cross Society did not respond to the questionnaire, which limited the inclusion of an important institutional perspective in the analysis. In addition, due to financial and logistical constraints, data collection was confined to Village Savala only, meaning the findings may not be fully generalisable to the wider Traditional Authority area, as other communities may have different experiences and perceptions of disaster risk and humanitarian aid. These limitations reflect the argument by John P. A. Ioannidis (2005), who emphasizes that all research is inherently affected by biases, design

constraints, and sample limitations, implying that no study is entirely free from methodological weaknesses and its findings should be interpreted within that context.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Key Informants Questionnaire

Assessing the Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Disaster Aid in Promoting Disaster Risks

GVH Savala, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa District

ASSESSING THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF HUMANITARIAN DISASTER AID IN PROMOTING DISASTER RISKS: A CASE STUDY OF GVH SAVALA, TA MAKHWIRA, CHIKWAWA

PURPOSE & INTRODUCTION:

My name is Amisi Amisi, a final-year student at MUST studying Disaster Risk Management. I am conducting research to assess whether humanitarian aid delivered in GVH Savala after floods and cyclones may be unintentionally increasing disaster risk in the community. Your professional insights are very valuable to this study. This interview will take approximately 45–60 minutes. With your permission, I may take written notes. All information shared will remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Informant Name:	
Organisation & Position:	
Date & Location:	

SECTION A: HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY IN GVH KAVALO

Q1. What types of humanitarian aid has your organisation / the government delivered to GVH Kavalo after flood events?

Q2. How do you decide which households receive aid? What targeting criteria do you use?

Q3. Does your organisation have an exit strategy or transition plan to move communities from aid dependency toward self-reliance?

SECTION B: AID DEPENDENCY AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Q4. In your professional experience, have you observed signs that repeated humanitarian aid is creating dependency among communities in Chikwawa / GVH Kavalo?

Q5. Have you observed situations where humanitarian aid may have discouraged people from relocating away from flood-prone areas?

Q6. In your view, has repeated aid delivery weakened local coping mechanisms, indigenous knowledge, or community preparedness in this area?

SECTION C: POLICY ALIGNMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

Q7. How well do current humanitarian aid practices in Chikwawa align with Malawi's DRM Policy (2015) and the Sendai Framework priorities on resilience and risk reduction?

Q8. What coordination exists between government, NGOs, and local structures (VDRMCs, traditional leaders) in delivering aid in GVH Kavalo?

Q9. What monitoring and evaluation systems are in place to track whether aid is achieving resilience outcomes, rather than just immediate relief?

SECTION D: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESILIENCE-BASED AID

Q10. What specific changes would you recommend to the way humanitarian aid is designed and delivered in flood-prone communities like GVH Savala in TA Makhwira to reduce unintended risk promotion?

Q11. Is there anything else you would like to add about humanitarian aid, disaster risk, and community resilience in this area that has not been covered?

Thank you very much for your time and valuable insights!

ASSESSING THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF HUMANITARIAN DISASTER AID IN PROMOTING DISASTER RISKS: A CASE STUDY OF GVH SAVALA, TA MAKHWIRA, CHIKWAWA

Appendix 2: Structured questionnaire for Households

SECTION A: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Sex of respondent

☐ Male

☐ Female

2. Age group

☐ 18–29

☐ 30–39

☐ 40–49

☐ 50–59

☐ 60+

3. Marital status

☐ Single

☐ Married

☐ Widowed

☐ Divorced/Separated

4. Highest level of education attained

☐ No formal education

☐ Primary

☐ Secondary

☐ Tertiary

5. Main source of livelihood

☐ Subsistence farming

☐ Fishing

☐ Small business

☐ Casual labour (ganyu)

☐ Other (specify): _____

6. How long have you lived in this area?

☐ Less than 5 years

☐ 5–10 years

☐ More than 10 years

SECTION B: DISASTER EXPERIENCE AND EXPOSURE

7. Which disasters have affected your household in the past 10 years?
(Tick all that apply)

☐ Floods

☐ Cyclones/storms

☐ Drought

☐ None

☐ Other (specify): _____

8. How often does your household experience flooding?

☐ Every year

☐ Almost every year

☐ Occasionally

☐ Rarely

9. What are the main impacts of floods on your household?
(Tick all that apply)

☐ Loss of crops

☐ Damage to house

☐ Loss of livestock

☐ Displacement

☐ Illness/injury

☐ Loss of income

SECTION C: ACCESS TO HUMANITARIAN DISASTER AID

10. Has your household received humanitarian assistance after disasters?
(If No, skip to Section F)

☐ Yes

☐ No

SECTION F: DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND SELF-RELIANCE

23. Does your household receive early warning information before floods?
☐ Yes
☐ No

24. What actions do you take when a flood warning is issued?
(Tick all that apply)
☐ Move to higher ground
☐ Protect assets
☐ Evacuate
☐ Wait for assistance
☐ Do nothing

25. Is your household part of any disaster preparedness group (e.g., VDRMC)?
☐ Yes
☐ No

26. Do you feel your household is more prepared for floods now than before receiving aid?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

SECTION G: POLICY AWARENESS AND ALIGNMENT

27. Are you aware of any government or NGO programmes aimed at reducing disaster risk?
☐ Yes
☐ No

28. Do aid programmes encourage relocation or safer settlement practices?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

29. In your opinion, does current aid help reduce future disaster risks?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Partly

SECTION H: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

30. What do you think should be changed in how disaster aid is provided in your community?

_____

_____

_____

31. What support would best help your household become more self-reliant and resilient?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 3: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Questionnaire

Research Topic: Assessing the Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Aid in Promoting Disaster Risks

Introduction

Good day and thank you for participating in this discussion. The purpose of this Focus Group Discussion is to understand community experiences with humanitarian aid and how such aid may influence disaster preparedness, settlement patterns, dependency, and future disaster risks. Your views will help improve disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response programmes. The discussion is confidential, and there are no right or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your honest opinions and experiences.

SECTION A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

1. Name of Community: _____
2. District: _____

3. Date of Discussion: _____
4. Number of Participants: _____
5. Gender Composition:
    - Male only
    - Female only
    - Mixed group
6. Age Category of Participants:
    - Youth (18–35)
    - Adults (36–59)
    - Elderly (60+)
7. Facilitator Name: _____
8. Note Taker: _____

SECTION B: COMMUNITY DISASTER EXPERIENCE

Opening Questions

1. What types of disasters commonly affect this community?
    - Floods
    - Droughts
    - Cyclones
    - Storms
    - Disease outbreaks.
2. How frequently do these disasters occur?

    _____
3. What are the major effects of disasters on households and livelihoods in this community?
    - Crop loss
    - Displacement
    - Loss of income

- Destruction of houses
- Food insecurity

SECTION C: EXPERIENCES WITH HUMANITARIAN AID

4. What kinds of humanitarian assistance has your community received after disasters?
    - Food aid
    - Cash transfers
    - Shelter
    - Farming inputs
    - Health services.
5. In your opinion, has humanitarian aid improved the wellbeing of affected households? How?

    _____

SECTION D: HUMANITARIAN AID AND DISASTER RISK

6. Do you think some forms of humanitarian aid can unintentionally increase disaster risks in this community?
    - Dependence on aid
    - Reduced self-reliance
    - Settlement in risky areas.
7. Have you observed households returning to flood-prone or unsafe areas because they expect aid during disasters?

    _____

8. Do people sometimes delay preparing for disasters because they believe aid will always come?

    _____

9. Do aid programmes encourage long-term resilience or short-term dependence?

    _____

SECTION E: COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS AND RESILIENCE

10. What measures does the community take to prepare for disasters?

- Early warning system
- Evacuation plans
- Savings groups.

11. Are community members involved in disaster risk reduction activities?
    - VDRMCs
    - Awareness campaigns
    - Community meetings
12. What types of support would help households reduce dependence on humanitarian aid?
    - Livelihood programmes
    - Irrigation
    - Skills training
    - Loans
    - Relocation support.

SECTION F: POLICY AND PROGRAMME IMPROVEMENT

13. Do you think current humanitarian programmes adequately address long-term disaster risk reduction?
14. How can humanitarian aid programmes be improved to strengthen resilience and reduce future disaster risks?
15. What role should government, NGOs, and communities play in reducing aid dependency?
16. What recommendations would you give to organizations providing humanitarian assistance?

SECTION G: CLOSING

17. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding disasters, humanitarian aid, and community resilience?

Facilitator Notes

Key Observations

Thank you so much for your time.