

# The Mwanalundu disaster risk reduction project

Over recent years the Mwanalundu river in southern Malawi has gone through a cycle of flooding and drying up

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How to manage risks we encounter in everyday life

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Photo: Dingiswayo Jere

Over recent years the Mwanalundu river in southern Malawi has gone through a cycle of flooding and drying up. This was caused by the deforestation of the forest reserves in the hilly areas near the source of the river. The trees were used for timber and fuel, and the cleared areas were used as gardens. Water flowed easily over the deforested land and transferred sand and debris into the river bed which led to flooding. Crops, livestock, schools and houses along the river in the Nsanje district were washed away during the floods. Once the rains stopped, the river quickly dried up and communities suffered water shortages. This article shares how a community managed the risk and reduced the likelihood of it happening again.

### **Tackling the problem**

The local church worked alongside the village chiefs and community leaders to meet with the villagers. They used the Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk (PADR) process to identify the hazards facing the community, their vulnerabilities to the hazards and then find a solution. They also identified how the community could use their own resources to reduce the risks. It became clear that the villages' main problem was the way the Mwanalundu river regularly flooded and dried up.

### **Implementing the project**

- The village chiefs set down laws to reduce deforestation and protect the Mwanalundu river from further flooding.
- The villagers were mobilised to start working on the river.
- Using hoes and shovels, they removed the sand and other debris from the river to improve the direction of the river and deepen its river bed. (This is known as de-silting.)
- The communities planted elephant grass, vertiva grass and trees along the river to strengthen its banks.

## **Results and outcome**

In the two years following the de-silting of the river bed, the river has not flooded again. Schools have not been disrupted due to flooding and gardens close to the river have not been washed away. In addition, during both winter and summer last year, for the first time in many years the Mwanalundu river flowed and the community did not suffer water shortages. 'Through the collective effort of the local people, community leaders and development partners, some of these problems can indeed be history like the Mwanalundu river,' says one of the village chiefs who played a vital role in the disaster risk reduction project.

## **Lessons learned**

- Community members have learnt from this experience and are now able to work out how to find answers to their other problems.
- Local people have learnt that they are a solution to the problems affecting them.
- Communities have the capacity to fight disasters through a well organised mobilisation process.

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