

## **'Eco-anxiety' or 'eco-trauma': Malawian village sends message of hope**

*Young people in Malawi invite you to see climate change through their eyes: their village's trauma in the wake of Cyclone Idai and how they are channelling their grief into action*

'Ecoanxiety': the recently-coined phrase to describe the increasing levels of stress that people are feeling in response to predicated consequences of climate change, described in 'Psychology Today' as "a fairly recent psychological disorder" (Castelloe, 2018).

But what phrase do we have to describe the psychological pain when is it not a threat of future disaster but a present reality? When the worst has already happened and you have lost everything? When you cannot sleep, not due to worrying what will happen if we do not act, but because you are starving under a make-shift shelter, despairing at the loss of your life's work?

This is more than anxiety. This is trauma, grief, despair. Our worst fears are the daily existence of millions, including the young people of Patalawo village in Malawi. Before Cyclone Idai, the same weather system assailed Malawi, causing severe flooding. According to government figures, more than 868,900 people are affected. Reports indicate widespread trauma as families face the loss of everything.

Trained and lent cameras by a local organisation, these young people were determined that we should glimpse climate change through their eyes. As subsistence families in one of the poorest countries in the world (Ventura, 2019), they depend on the weather to grow enough food to live.

They spent two weeks taking photos and then clustered them into four key messages:

### **1. "The flood waters were so strong, so powerful. They destroyed everything."**

"This dyke was constructed to reduce the flow of flood water. This photo shows how strong the flood current was – it broke the stone dyke."



### **2. "Our homes were destroyed."**

"The man is lying in the ruins of his house. He has nowhere to live. His house was destroyed at night, while he slept. The walls fell on him and he was badly injured by falling bricks. I took the photo so people outside our village can see how devastated people are."

3. "All our food, all our work for an entire year has vanished. What will we feed our families?"

"This photo tells the story of a woman whose maize field has been completely washed away, buried beneath this sand. She has nothing left in her life. Her whole year of work has been made meaningless. And her suffering is going to last long. She has nothing to eat for the whole year, nothing to feed her children."



"This old lady's crops were washed away. She is not strong, farming is difficult. She had worked so hard, using all her energy to grow food, but now she has lost everything. It was difficult for me to take this photo as she was in tears. But she wanted to tell her story, what has happened to her."

"This woman is very sad because her crops were all drowned. She is the only one to take care of her grandchildren and now she cannot feed them. She has no idea what to do."



4. "We are resilient in spite of everything. Some are already starting to move forwards and do what they can for themselves. This shows our strength in our village – people are already trying to rebuild their lives."

"Their house was completely destroyed but they quickly built the small shelter behind."

“The woman has already gone out to collect resources so she can start rebuilding her house.”



The young people channelled their grief into action. They analysed the issues that exacerbated the flood’s impact, such as poorly constructed houses, and made plans with their village to tackle them.

Their experience in no way negates the pain of eco-anxiety. Grief is a natural response to the intensity of suffering that climate change is causing, witnessed to in the photos, as well as future danger.

But their fourth message is optimistic. As humans, we have startling capacity for resilience and innovation. If people can replant, rebuild and fight forwards with everything washed away and starvation looming, we too must act – the best relief for many with eco-anxiety (Parkinson, 2019). Despite the powerlessness many feel, scientists toll a last hope if we act now. Meticulously modelled scenarios demonstrate we already have the technologies we need to achieve the Paris target (Allen; Bottoms, 2018). Moreover, the successful adaptation of communities around the world assures us that we too can change rapidly. Throughout history, humans exceed contemporary conceptions of the possible. Simms and Newell’s report (2017) offers numerous examples of how “we are actually good at adapting when the need arises” – such as in World War II where we drastically transformed everyday life.

Personal choices make a significant difference, such as our use of meat and dairy, how we travel, and our general attitude towards consumption (see Allen et al., 2017 for details). Moreover, our choices must declare to our government that we fully support their calling a climate emergency and are eager to make any sacrifices required. We are even likely to find ourselves better off – many of the lifestyle changes have significant health and social benefits (Allen et al., 2013). The BBC quoted Owen Gaffney, co-author of ‘The Exponential Climate Action Roadmap’: “All the solutions exist to [halve global emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030], and if we implement them then more people will be living in cleaner cities, eating healthy diets and working in resilient, buoyant economies.” (Fawbert, 2019)

We must not forget those who have been hit first and hit hardest, whose governments did not have the warning or the resources that we do. Giving to organisations like Eagles (<http://www.eaglesmalawi.org/>) supports villages like Patalawo to adapt to the harsh reality that we have created and builds long-term resilience. The young people of Patalawo call on us to partner with them: "I want to tell others that because of people far away, our weather is changing. People out there are not looking after the environment and so we are suffering." Their conviction is our inspiration; their courage, our challenge.

## References:

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