



Crisis Modifier

Learning Brief

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KEY MESSAGES

- J The BRACC crisis modifier was activated twice between the start of the programme and the 2021 evaluation, allocating a total of GBP 8.4 million to respond to food insecurity across two of the four PROSPER programme districts in 2019/2020 and in 2020/2021.
- J BRACC implementing partners and the donor value the crisis modifier as an approach to increase the reliability and efficiency in funding the response to regular, predictable slow-onset food insecurity crises.
- J The crisis modifier also appears to contribute to the protection of resilience gains, helping people from sliding into (further) food insecurity in times of acute crises. However, from an evaluation perspective, it is difficult to isolate the impact of the BRACC crisis modifier from other funding, and unclear to what extent it reached people participating in other BRACC programme activities aimed at strengthening resilience.
- J Strengthening national social protection systems (including through other components of BRACC) has been critical in deepening linkages and integration of the humanitarian response within government-led shock responsive social protection.

BACKGROUND

The majority of livelihoods in Malawi depend on agriculture, which accounts for 29% of the country's gross domestic product, and more than 80% of total employment. Rain-fed agriculture is widespread, meaning harvests are highly vulnerable to changes and variability in rainfall. Floods and droughts are common in Malawi, and contribute to the population's risk of food insecurity^{1, A}. Although Malawi's future climate is difficult to predict accurately because of its geographical location between two climate systems, there is general agreement across climate models that temperatures will rise; and that the likelihood of extreme weather events will further increase over the next 20 years.³

On top of these weather- and climate-related risks, the political economy in Malawi has contributed to a weakened agriculture sector and poorly functioning food markets, in particular for maize, which is the country's main staple crop. This means that even in relatively 'good' rainy seasons, small variations in the weather can result in a situation where large parts of the population are no longer able to meet their basic needs.^{4,5} In response, the Government of Malawi (GoM), supported by development partners, has been providing assistance to food insecure households during lean seasons, which typically last from October or November to around March.^{2,6}

In addition to the predictable, cyclical lean season food insecurity, Malawi has been heavily impacted by extraordinary slow-onset disasters such as the 2015/2016 El Niño-induced drought, and rapid-onset events such as heavy floods in 2015 and 2019. The latter were caused by extreme rains and storms from a severe weather system that developed into Cyclone Idai.

In this context, the United Kingdom has invested in the Building Resilience and Adapting to Climate Change (BRACC) programme in Malawi, which started in 2018. The programme's objective is to contribute to a reduction in extreme poverty and end the recurrent cycle of hunger and humanitarian assistance in Malawi. BRACC aims to achieve this through market-based approaches to improving people's livelihoods. However, given the frequent and recurrent shocks to rural livelihoods in Malawi—and the related challenge to building long-term resilience in the face of these—the programme also supports the development of scalable social safety net systems that respond predictably to climate- and weather-related shocks.

A key component of this strategy is the crisis modifier implemented by BRACC's Promoting Sustainable Partnerships for Empowered Resilience (PROSPER) consortium. Crisis modifiers are mechanisms in longer-term development programmes that allow for the diversion of funds, or the allocation of earmarked funds, "towards a response if a crisis should develop or threaten during the period of implementation".⁷ They have been used as part of several large resilience programmes, with the intention of protecting the resilience gains achieved under these programmes by enabling a rapid response. Examples include USAID's drought response mechanisms attached to its resilience programmes in the Horn of Africa⁸ and the Providing Humanitarian Assistance to Sahel Emergencies crisis modifier that was linked to the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO)-funded Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programme.⁹

PURPOSE OF THIS LEARNING BRIEF

This brief reviews how the BRACC crisis modifier was designed, how it has worked in practice, and what can be learned from the experience for future resilience programming. The brief is part of the BRACC evaluation undertaken by the programme's Knowledge and Policy Hub in 2021. Box 1 highlights the main evaluation and interview questions related to the crisis modifier.

^A Other major hazards the country is exposed to include landslides, earthquakes, pests and diseases.^{1,2}

Box 1: Evaluation question relating to the crisis modifier in the BRACC evaluation

Evaluation question 1: To what extent did the programme contribute to strengthening climate resilience/adaptive capacity to shocks, taking into account a changing climate, at the household, community and national levels? In which locations/contexts? For whom (men, women, younger people, older people, disabled people, three target groups)?

Crisis modifier-related sub-question: What are the impacts of social protection (shock-sensitive social protection mechanisms and social protection within the PROSPER graduation approach and the crisis-modifier) on individual and household level resilience, food and nutrition security and poverty reduction? Using resilience index/indicators?

Crisis modifier-related questions in the evaluation interviews and focus groups: *We'd like to know about how the crisis modifier has worked in this programme...*

1. Have there been occasions where the crisis modifier has been activated in the programme? Why?
2. What shocks triggered the crisis modifier?
3. Who was targeted, and how?
4. What have been the effects of the crisis modifier? How? Why? For whom? In what contexts?

METHODOLOGY

The BRACC programme was evaluated using mixed methods, including both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative evaluation methods included a randomised control trial designed to measure the impact of PROSPER interventions, which was implemented in two districts and utilised household survey data in a wide range of resilience and welfare outcomes. The same survey data were also collected for a sample of participant households in the two PROSPER districts excluded from the impact evaluation. The qualitative methods included key informant interviews (KIIs), case studies, and focus group discussions that collected data on intervention-level outcomes and impact.

The findings in this brief draw primarily on the KIIs with programme implementing partners (IPs) and the donor. Interviews were complemented by programme documents and secondary literature on crisis modifiers and lean season responses in Malawi.

What is the BRACC crisis modifier and how was it designed to work?

Under the BRACC programme, the FCDO set up a crisis modifier with the primary purpose “to respond to predictable and seasonal food insecurity in BRACC districts over the life of the programme (2018-2023)”.¹⁰ The crisis modifier was set up to be delivered through the programme’s PROSPER consortium.¹¹ In the early stages of BRACC, GBP 20 million were earmarked for the crisis modifier, located under the UN Multi Partner Trust Fund.^B

Each year, the FCDO determines the budget available through the crisis modifier.¹⁰ The specific allocation process for the BRACC crisis modifier is described in the FCDO allocation guidance, and summarised in Figure 1. Even though the priority for the crisis modifier is to support standard slow-onset lean season responses, the guidance note describes circumstances and processes where the crisis modifier may be used to respond to rapid-onset events such as flooding (e.g. in cases such as the 2019 flooding related to Cyclone Idai), or to extraordinary slow-onset events (e.g. in cases such as the 2015/2016 El Niño-induced drought).

Figure 1: BRACC crisis modifier triggers, allocation decisions and use

<p>Slow-onset standard lean season responses</p>	<p>Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee report (MVAC): Districts with area classification > 20% of IPC3 or above Potential use of other triggers in the longer term</p>	<p>FCDO approaches UN consortium to action a proposal ahead of the lean season</p> <p>FCDO Growth and Resilience Team submits recommendation for how the crisis modifier is allocated to FCDO Malawi Head of Office for final approval</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash transfers delivered through the UN consortia, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Vertical expansion of the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) in line with lean season response Horizontal expansion of the SCTP in line with lean season response Blended vertical and horizontal expansion Vertical expansion of the WFP Food for Asset (FFA) programme Unconditional cash transfers for nutrition
<p>Rapid-onset and/or extraordinary slow-onset events</p>	<p>No other clearly defined triggers beyond MVAC</p>	<p>Extraordinary slow onset: FCDO approaches PROSPER UN consortium to action a proposal</p> <p>Rapid onset: FCDO may approach any PROSPER consortium partner(s) or other agency(ies) to action a response proposal</p> <p>FCDO Growth and Resilience Team submits recommendation for how the crisis modifier is allocated to FCDO Malawi Head of Office for final approval</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash transfers Allocations to Inter-Agency Standing Committee activations Allocations to Corporate Emergencies (when Under-Secretary-General / Emergency Relief Coordinator declares a corporate emergency response)
<p>TRIGGERS</p>		<p>ALLOCATION DECISIONS</p>	<p>PREFERRED ELIGIBLE USES</p>

Source: Author’s figure based on FCDO’s BRACC crisis modifier allocation guidance.¹⁰

^B For more information on the Fund, see: <https://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/MW100>.

There is a strong emphasis in this allocation process on aligning the BRACC crisis modifier activities with the SCTP and the lean season response, as a way to strengthen the linkages between national social protection and humanitarian cash transfer programming. This is something other areas of the BRACC programme, including PROSPER and the GIZ strengthening social protection systems component are also supporting^C (for more detail see the BRACC evaluation synthesis report).

The geographic focus of the crisis modifier lies on BRACC programme districts, even though BRACC-assisted Territorial Authorities (TAs) within a district that is generally affected by a shock may not always be directly impacted. In other words, some TAs that are otherwise not targeted by BRACC interventions may benefit from a crisis modifier response if they are in one of the BRACC districts, as long as that district overall is sufficiently affected by an event to trigger a crisis modifier response.

Despite this geographic prioritisation, the FCDO does not exclude the possibility of activating the crisis modifier to support a response outside of BRACC focal districts in exceptional circumstances, “depending on needs, what others are doing and whether there are any gaps elsewhere”.¹⁰ The crisis modifier allocation guidance does not provide a clearer definition of what constitutes such exceptional circumstances, thus retaining flexibility in the decision-making process within the FCDO.

In its design, the BRACC crisis modifier reflects a number of experiences and lessons learned from the implementation and evaluation of crisis modifiers in other programmes. This includes the following principles and design features, which are to varying degrees adopted in the BRACC crisis modifier approach:

- J **Using pre-agreed triggers or a reliable decision-making process for access to funding to ensure rapid disbursement:**^{7,12–14} The crisis modifier allocation process includes trigger thresholds and responsibilities for decision-making, most specifically for the lean season response (over 20% of district population classified IPC 3 or higher).^D No pre-agreed triggers and very flexible decision-making processes were put in place for rapid-onset and extraordinary slow-onset emergencies. The allocation process guidance suggests that triggers would be reviewed by the FCDO in the longer term, to develop clearer, more transparent and objective pre-agreed triggers. However, the FCDO did not pursue this further over the course of BRACC. A revision of triggers was not perceived feasible within the constraints of the programme timeframes, and the FCDO referred to other ongoing programmes working on the development of triggers for crisis modifiers, anticipatory action and risk finance interventions.
- J **Contingency planning:**^{9,12,14} There was not a detailed contingency plan developed for the BRACC crisis modifier as such. However, the allocation process guidelines lay out the standard approach to the release and use of funding, in particular for lean season responses. Given that the BRACC crisis modifier funding does not support separate interventions, but contributes to a coordinated, government-led response, planning happened at the level of the scalable social protection system and its technical capacity supporting partners where various resources are being pooled, rather than at the level of the crisis modifier mechanism.
- J **Delivering and coordinating the response through existing structures:**^{8,9,12,14–17}

^C For more information, see Leavy, J., Gould, C., Klema, M., McConnachie, M., Venable, E. and Vincent, K. 2022. Building Resilience and Adapting to Climate Change. Synthesis of the 2021 BRACC evaluation. BRACC programme. Available at www.resilience.mw

^D The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) approach assists governments and related partners to establish the seriousness and extent of acute and chronic food insecurity.

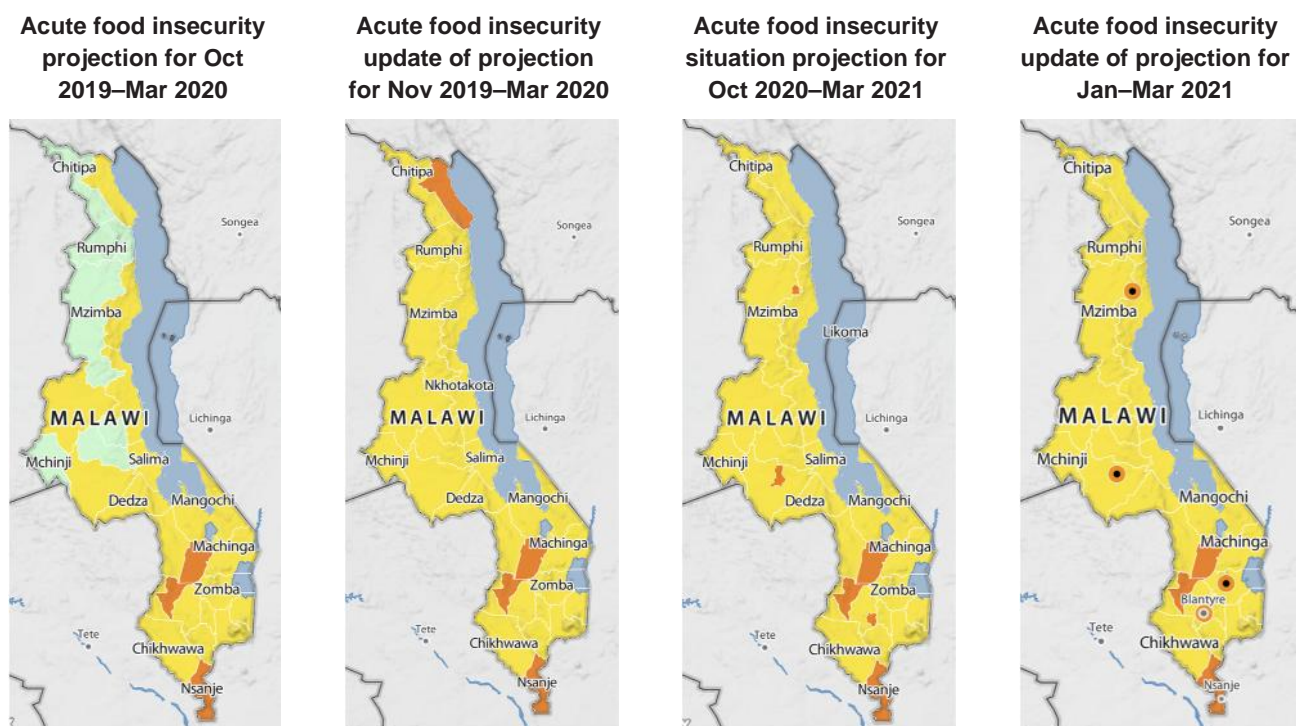
Fostering linkages between social protection and humanitarian cash transfers, and supporting scalable national social protection systems have been key priorities for the BRACC crisis modifier. The intention to build on and deliver through existing structures is reflected in the crisis modifier design, e.g. in the preferred use of funds for a slow-onset, standard lean season response (see options (1) to (3) of preferred eligible uses in Figure 1).

- J **Integrating and defining the scope of the crisis modifier within a broader risk management framework:**^{8,12,14,17} The BRACC crisis modifier is first and foremost aimed at responding to predictable and seasonal food insecurity in BRACC districts, even though the allocation process guidance recognises the detrimental impacts of other types of rapid-onset and slow-onset events—e.g. floods and droughts—in Malawi. Consequently, the crisis modifier includes an option for activation in such cases, with the allocation depending on the “scale and geographic location of emergency, interagency needs assessment, other donors’ commitments and pledges, and sectoral gaps”.¹⁰ The guidance does not, however, explicitly discuss or weigh up alternative strategies—and their comparative advantages—for managing and financing different types of risk in different parts of the country in the context of the GoM’s disaster risk management and the national disaster risk finance strategy.
- J **Continuous communication and feedback channels between donor, implementers and partners that support revisions and adaptations in a flexible mechanism:**^{13,14} Crisis modifier allocation conditions as defined in the allocation process have a relatively high level of flexibility, allowing the FCDO to be reactive. In some cases, allocation guidelines clearly state the intention of adapting the allocation and its use in line with what others are doing.
- J **Simplicity and speed in the allocation process:**^{7–9,15–17} Crisis modifier implementers in previous resilience and development programmes have sometimes struggled to meet relatively complex crisis modifier designs or high administrative burdens, for instance embedded in rigorous needs assessments and lengthy applications required. In the case of the BRACC crisis modifier setup, implementing partners are required to action proposals, though the analysis and trigger thresholds, where they exist, are relatively simple, coherent across the programme, and attached to the MVAC, i.e. a larger coordinated and already recognised process that is not specific to the BRACC programme.
- J **Scale of funding needs to match the needs in a major crisis:**^{7,8,14} The overall BRACC crisis modifier envelope—and the funding it could release when triggered—was substantial, with a PROSPER-implemented crisis modifier of up to GBP 20 million relative to a GBP 52.5 million investment in PROSPER to support climate resilient livelihoods. In addition, the alignment with the SCTP and other humanitarian and social protection partners meant the BRACC crisis modifier was able to contribute to a respond at scale in times of crisis.
- J **Technical capacity to implement crisis modifier funded interventions:**^{8,9} Limited technical capacity to deliver humanitarian responses among the implementors in development and resilience programmes has been identified as a major constraint in past FCDO- and USAID-funded crisis modifiers. Under the BRACC crisis modifier, the GoM’s SCTP, with technical support from UN agencies that have longstanding experience in lean season response in Malawi, is the prioritised delivery mechanism. Even though scalable social protection is still in its very early stages in Malawi and therefore is likely to face some initial challenges with regards to technical and operational capacity, BRACC clearly recognises this issue. The programme thus complements the crisis modifier approach with technical capacity support and social protection systems strengthening through some of its other components (including the PROSPER UN Consortium and GIZ project).

How has the BRACC crisis modifier worked in practice?

Between the start of the BRACC implementation in late 2018 and the time of the evaluation in the second half of 2021, the programme's crisis modifier was activated twice to support lean season responses, once in 2019/2020, and once in 2020/2021. Figure 2 shows the results from the 2019 and 2020 MVAC annual IPC assessments that informed the government's Lean Season Response Plans for those years. Balaka, Chikwawa, Mangochi and Phalombe are PROSPER focal districts. All four were projected to be in crisis in the 2018/2019 lean season preceding the BRACC crisis modifier, while the same applied for Balaka in 2019/2020 and in 2020/2021.

Figure 2: Food insecurity prompting lean season response in Malawi



Source: ¹⁸

Note: Green = Phase 1 – minimal; Yellow = Phase 2 – stressed; Orange = Phase 3 – crisis; Red = Phase 4 – emergency; Dark red = Phase 5 – famine. The phase mapped represents the highest severity affecting at least 20% of the population.

Supporting the Malawian Government's lean season response, the BRACC crisis modifier released about GBP 3.9 million in 2019/2020, while it made available GBP 4.5 million in 2020/2021 (KII BRACC programme staff). Table 1 summarises these two activations, and gives an overview of the lean season assistance provided, in part through crisis modifier funding, over both seasons.

The 2019/2020 lean season was the first time that the lean season response in Malawi was coordinated across social protection and humanitarian partners to leverage the GoM's national social protection systems in order to reach the acutely food insecure population in Malawi. While social protection donors supported the vertical and horizontal expansion of the SCTP in four districts, humanitarian actors, "channelled funds to WFP to provide complementary implementation capacity

to reach the remaining caseload on behalf of the Government” using the Joint Emergency Food Assistance Programme (JEFAP) Guidelines.¹⁹ In addition to delivering the JEFAP-based assistance, the WFP also supported the GoM with the horizontal expansion in Balaka through implementation capacity. Vertical expansion relied on the SCTP Management Information System (MIS) to identify beneficiaries, while the horizontal expansion (in Balaka in 2019/2020, and in Balaka and Nsanje in 2020/2021) used the Unified Beneficiary Register (UBR) as a basis for targeting beyond the regular SCTP caseload that is captured in the programme’s MIS²⁰.

Table 1: Summary of the BRACC programme crisis modifier activations

	2019/2020 lean season response	2020/2021 lean season response
BRACC crisis modifier allocation	GBP 3.9 million	GBP 4.5 million
Total lean season response funding	USD 9.6 million	USD 16 million for cash-based transfers, USD 13 million equivalent for in-kind transfers
Districts targeted for lean season response	Balaka, Neno, Nsanje, Phalombe, Dedza and Karonga	Balaka, Blantyre, Chikwawa, Dedza, Lilongwe, Machinga, Mangochi, Neno, Nsanje, Phalombe, Salima, Zomba
Total caseload for the lean season response	451,692 people reached in the 6 most-affected districts, 1.9 million people classified as IPC Phase 3 or higher in total	1.1 million people reached in the 12 most-affected districts, 2.6 million people classified as IPC Phase 3 or higher in total
Transfer value and duration	USD 30 per month equalling 50 kg of maize, 10 kg of pulses and 2 kg of vegetable oil at market price for 2-5 months	MWK 23,100 (about USD 30) per month for cash-based assistance, 50 kg maize per month for the in-kind assistance for 2-4 months
Linkages of the lean season response with the GoM’s shock-sensitive social protection systems	<p>Vertical expansion of the GoM’s SCTP delivered to 108,000 regular SCTP beneficiaries across four districts: Balaka, Neno, Nsanje and Phalombe</p> <p>Horizontal expansion of the SCTP to 62,500 affected people in Balaka, leveraging the SCTP’s UBR</p> <p>Complementary implementation capacity provided by WFP on behalf of GoM to reach a further 281,192 beneficiaries using the JEFAP guidelines where the national social protection system could not be leveraged in Dedza, Karonga, Neno, Nsanje and Phalombe</p>	<p>Vertical expansion of the SCTP delivered through GoM to regular SCTP beneficiaries in three districts: Balaka, Nsanje and Neno</p> <p>Complementary implementation capacity provided by WFP to deliver cash assistance, mostly using JEFAP guidelines and leveraging the social protection system where possible, in Balaka, Nsanje, Dedza, Neno, Phalombe, Machinga and Zomba</p> <p>GoM through Department of Disaster Management Affairs of the Republic of Malawi providing in-kind assistance with technical support from WFP in Blantyre, Chikwawa, Mangochi, Salima and Lilongwe</p>

Source: BRACC evaluation KIIs; ^{19,20}

Note: BRACC/PROSPER districts highlighted. Not all assistance to those districts was BRACC funded.

In Balaka, the horizontal and vertical expansions were rolled out through e-payments^E, in part with the expectation that this would contribute to the development of a financial ecosystem serving low-income households. E-payments had previously been used for regular SCTP transfers in Balaka

^E In Malawi, the term e-payment is broadly to describe “a payment system using electronic platforms such as banks or mobile money operators. Currently the MoPPSW is using the bank based e-payment model in Balaka and Ntcheu districts. Funds for transfers to beneficiaries in these districts are channeled to the banks (e-payment agents) which then disburse into the beneficiary accounts following a pay roll sent by the Ministry”.¹⁹

district, meaning SCTP households already had bank accounts. However, opening bank accounts for households in real time to facilitate horizontal expansion in the 2019/2020 lean season response proved challenging and caused delays in the delivery process. JEFAP assistance was delivered in the form of cash-in-transit. This was found to be quicker in a context where the e-payment infrastructure for horizontal expansions is not yet fully developed. In turn, cash-in-transit does not support potential secondary objectives such as enhancing financial literacy or the creation of a financial ecosystem¹⁹, and may not be quicker anymore once bank account penetration is increased.

Across both lean season responses, over 1.5 million food insecure people were reached with cash or in-kind assistance that was in part funded by the FCDO through the BRACC crisis modifier, alongside funding from the GoM and other humanitarian and social protection donors. Following the initial allocation process design (Figure 1), the crisis modifier would have only been activated in those districts where the MVAC trigger reached 20% prevalence of IPC 3 or higher. Out of the BRACC districts, that would have only included Balaka. In practice, however, the FCDO revised this threshold downward to 15% in both years of activation. This was done in order to align with the horizontal and vertical expansions of the SCTP, and with strategies of other donors. The flexibility built into the crisis modifier allocation process in this case was an important factor in supporting the overall aims of coherence and alignment with national social protection systems (KII BRACC programme staff).

To what extent the lean season assistance reached people who also participated in other BRACC programme interventions is unclear, however, and was not possible to clearly determine through the 2021 evaluation. In part, this was because some respondents benefitted from a multitude of cash and in-kind assistance and it was not always evident which programmes they were participating in or receiving assistance through. Overall, the approximate number of respondents who reported having received cash during the magnitude of the government-led response throughout the lean season period, was relatively small. In the BRACC impact evaluation, around 10% of households in Balaka and Phalombe, i.e. the districts where cash-based transfers were delivered as part of the government-led lean season response, reported having received any cash transfers in the 12 months prior to the survey, from either government or other organisations (including UN and NGOs). This includes, but is not limited to, the lean season response.

Even though in theory the crisis modifier allocation process also allows for the mechanism to fund a response to certain extraordinary slow-onset events and rapid-onset emergencies, this did not happen in practice during the period between the BRACC programme's start and the evaluation in the second half of 2021.

What effects did the BRACC crisis modifier have?

Effects on beneficiaries targeted through the lean season responses

The lean season response overall was found to improve food security outcomes of beneficiaries. The 2019/2020 lean season post-distribution monitoring conducted in March 2020 and consolidated for Nsanje, Neno and Balaka showed that households had enhanced food consumption and improved dietary diversity and concludes that these outcomes are likely associated with the lean season response. The number of households facing severe food insecurity also decreased among those receiving assistance. Improved food security outcomes were found across all scaling modalities—vertical expansion of the SCTP, horizontal expansion, and allocation based on JEFAP guidelines.¹⁹

At the same time, however, evaluation respondents pointed out the immediate, short-term nature of the crisis modifier benefits. They highlighted that the crisis modifier was useful and necessary to assist households in the Malawian context of prevalent acute food insecurity during the lean season and in other emergencies. However, the more comprehensive, longer-term interventions supported through other PROSPER components were the types of activities required to actually move out of the continued cycle of predictable, seasonal, chronic food insecurity and humanitarian response that affects the same districts and households year after year (KII BRACC programme staff).

It should be noted that because the crisis modifier was not a focus in the BRACC impact evaluation design, the more specific contributions it may have had to enhancing food security and other outcomes at household level could not be analysed in more detail. From an evaluation perspective, the level of integration of the response makes it difficult to isolate the impact of the BRACC crisis modifier, and it remains unclear to what extent the crisis modifier managed to reach and protect the resilience gains of households participating in other BRACC activities. Protecting resilience gains of PROSPER programme participants was the initial idea and starting point for the crisis modifier. However, this later changed to contributions towards the GoM-led lean season response, thus allowing the crisis modifier to support alignment and scale, and based on the assumption that the lean season response would also capture those most in need of assistance within BRACC.

“Once you start looking at all of the different projects providing cash transfers during the lean season, it actually becomes really complicated. So we moved away from the original design to try and take a much more district-wide approach. (...) [We] were meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in that district with the idea then that if you protected the district, you would protect [BRACC] beneficiaries.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

Effect on BRACC programme delivery

The 2021 evaluation shows that programme funders and implementers in the PROSPER UN consortium value the crisis modifier as a way to increase the reliability and efficiency in funding the response to regular, predictable slow-onset food insecurity crises. The fact that crisis modifier funding was used to support a larger lean season response at district level in coordination with the GoM and other partners—thus supporting government systems and economies of scale as opposed to implementing smaller, separate responses through alternative channels—contributed to this perceived efficiency.

“(For) something which is pretty much a predictable crisis (...), having a crisis modifier like that, is

just really, really cost-efficient and saving a lot of time (...). It's really much more efficient and timely. To give you an even more concrete example, from [one] donor last year, we got the funding pretty much in February, almost at the end of the lean season response. So thankfully we could [respond], because, you know, we pooled all the funding together and we could count on other donor resources to cover the needs of the food insecure population, but in a year where we do not have actually these pooled resources, mostly from FCDO, to be that timely, we would have had a very late response. So yeah, it's really useful, I think it's the way to go.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

“I think one of the challenges around the lean season is the time it takes to lever. Cause you know, the results for the lean season come out in August or September for a lean season that may start anywhere between October and March, right. Of the same next class next year. And so (...) we benefited on the WFP side from the crisis modifier because it allowed us to mobilise funds a little bit more rapidly, right. And to have a pool of funding, to respond in the PROSPER districts where we had the need to respond as per the acute IPC process.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

Despite these benefits of the crisis modifier in the cases of predictable and regular lean season response, some BRACC implementing partners mentioned in the relatively early stages of the programme being unsure of what the triggers were for emergencies other than the lean season response, or why the crisis modifier has not been activated in rapid-onset and extraordinary slow-onset events that occurred during the lifetime of BRACC, such as the 2019 floods and the Covid-19 response (KII BRACC programme staff). This uncertainty and confusion around triggers and past (non-) allocations highlights the importance of transparency and communication in relation to the crisis modifier across the programme, especially in this case where processes are designed to be flexible, and are therefore sometimes unspecific or vague.

Effect on national social protection systems

Strengthening national social protection systems (including through other components of BRACC, alongside the crisis modifier) has been critical in deepening the linkages and integration of the humanitarian response within government-led shock-sensitive social protection. The fact that BRACC engaged on those fronts—strengthening national systems for the delivery of scalable social protection and credibly committing to using these systems through crisis modifier funding—was highlighted as a particularly effective strategy in this regard.

“Pre-PROSPER annual humanitarian responses were implemented in silo to the government's social protection sector (...). Now today, the partners support the government to try to build a system to build flexibility into the social protection system so that it works with the humanitarian sector to reach families affected by shocks.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

“PROSPER has been really instrumental in leveraging and boosting this [integration of the humanitarian and social protection response]. So we've done horizontal and vertical expansion for the crisis modifier using the social protection system. The first year we did this in one district, the second year two districts. And it's gaining traction as of this year. I think there's going to be vertical expansion for districts.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

“This programme was able to put together shock-sensitive social protection systems, building a long-term view knowing that it was supposed to be a five-year programme with crisis modifier funding, so that putting those systems into place, they were going to be used if needed, and I think that that package together enabled more systems building than would have been done otherwise. I mean, you may not put in nine months of capacity building on systems if you're not even sure if a donor is going to be willing to come forward with the budget to use that work. You can, and sometimes development actors do it anyway, but I think it allowed for much faster, greater gains in the area of

shock-sensitive social protection because it was known that there was support on both sides: on the capacity building side and then on the actual use of those systems.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

Nonetheless, the alignment of the crisis modifier funding with national social protection scale-ups, and the new linkages between social protection and humanitarian assistance were not without challenge. For instance, there were some issues in the acceptance and adoption of social protection targeting processes (e.g. the use of the UBR in Balaka horizontal expansion) at the level of communities, which had previously participated in humanitarian lean season responses that used different, participatory targeting modalities. Other challenges included an initial low level of coverage with national IDs and bank accounts, as well as incomplete or incoherent datasets.

“In as much as it was successfully done, (...) we had some challenges, especially because we were using a new system and it was really difficult for some communities to adopt it easily, especially the village leaders, because they were used to do the old systems like targeting using the JEFAP guidelines. So [there were some] misunderstandings. Some people could not understand and follow why we’re bringing the names to them. This was because we were taking from the system, unlike in the old system where we were doing it openly and they were selecting themselves (...).

And apart from that, because we adopted the SCTP channel of cashing out the money, we adopted (...) e-payments. So it meant for beneficiaries that even if your name is there, if you don’t have an ID, (...) there was a need to process an ID form (...), because, you know, the banks, they don’t deal with a beneficiary who doesn’t have a national ID.” (KII BRACC programme staff)

It should be noted, however, that the two years of lean season response supported by the BRACC crisis modifier were the first in Malawi where a joint response was rolled out, meaning they presented an initial opportunity for the involved stakeholders to trial new processes and learn for future implementation (for more details on implementation challenges, lessons learned and recommendations, see the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 after action reviews^{19,20}).

Conclusions

The BRACC crisis modifier was activated twice between the start of the programme and the evaluation in 2021. Both activations supported the Malawian Government-led response to the lean season in two of the four PROSPER programme intervention districts (Balaka and Phalombe) in 2019/2020 and in 2020/2021.

Even though, in theory, the crisis modifier allocation process would have allowed the mechanism to fund a response to certain extraordinary slow-onset events and rapid-onset emergencies, this did not happen in practice. How the crisis modifier would have performed in these types of situations, without clear triggers—and flexible decision-making, allocation and use protocols in place—for rapid-onset and extraordinary slow-onset hazards, could therefore not be validated through the evaluation. The findings presented in this brief therefore largely apply to situations where a crisis modifier is used to respond to regular and predictable events. This distinction is important, because rapid-onset and extraordinary slow events pose unique challenges that a crisis modifier would have to address, for instance with regards to the potentially much greater speed of response required.

In relation to the use of the BRACC crisis modifier in the context of a regular, predictable lean season, a couple of lessons emerged from the evaluation:

1. **The BRACC crisis modifier is increasing the reliability, efficiency, and speed in funding the response to regular, predictable slow-onset food insecurity crises in BRACC programme districts.** Consistent with advantages of crisis modifier approaches found in other programmes¹², the BRACC crisis modifier was reported to enable a faster response than is usually possible through ad hoc humanitarian aid, because application and allocation processes are pre-agreed, and existing structures used for delivery.
2. **There are indications that the crisis modifier contributes to food security outcomes, helping people from sliding into (further) food insecurity in times of acute crises.** Monitoring of the lean season response at large, to which the BRACC crisis modifier contributed, showed that households benefitting from the response had enhanced food consumption, improved dietary diversity, and a slight decrease in severe food insecurity compared to those who did not receive assistance through the response.

However, during the evaluation it was not feasible to isolate the impact of the BRACC crisis modifier from other sources of funding. It therefore remains unclear to what extent the lean season response supported by the crisis modifier reached people participating in other BRACC activities, and whether it helped protect resilience gains from the programme.
3. **Strengthening national social protection systems (including through other components of BRACC) has been critical in deepening linkages and integration of the humanitarian response within government-led shock responsive social protection.** The design of the BRACC crisis modifier clearly supports linkages between humanitarian and social protection responses through its alignment with national social protection systems and its default allocation priorities. Complementary programme activities were implemented to strengthen the capacity of the national social protection system to scale up and out in times of crisis. This also helped existing systems absorb crisis modifier funding.

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