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withstand environmental disasters

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Building a resilient and sustainable health system is a painstaking effort – but it is the only way to secure the health of our people

LAZARUS CHAKWERA 20 April 2023 • 2:26pm

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Locals in Chiradzulu district survey roads destroyed by mudslides and rockfalls from Cyclone Freddy in Blantyre, Malawi | CREDIT: Esa Alexander/REUTERS

monster", "rare and deadly", "Earth's most energetic storm" - these are all epithets that have been applied to the recent Cyclone Freddy, which has devastated my country, Malawi, and our neighbours, especially Mozambique.

lasting tropical cyclone. Human-made climate change, as we know, is causing storms and cyclones to last longer and be more violent, charged with more rain. What used to be regular

challenges we could absorb has become cataclysmic destruction that we have no

time to mourn and repair before the next disaster hits.

Cyclone Freddy unleashed about the same amount of energy as an entire North

American hurricane season. It has also likely broken the record for the longest-

Malawi and Mozambique were still recovering from last year's "unprecedented" cyclones and tropical storms when Freddy broke even those records. Over 500 of my fellow citizens have died - as many are still missing and presumed dead.

two million have been variously affected by the loss of their loved ones, their livelihoods and their food sources under rivers of mud.

Over half a million are sheltering in camps, having lost their homes, while over



Entire villages were buried or swept away. Here in Malawi, as is the case

many of our health facilities. Some are entirely gone, while others will take

elsewhere in Africa, drought is alternating with intensified rainfall, leading to the paradox of landslides even as harvests perish for lack of water. Just as critical, especially for the long-term recovery of Malawi, Freddy wrecked

This is particularly concerning as Malawi has been battling <u>a severe cholera</u> epidemic, connected in part to the damage caused by Storms Ana and Gombe last year and to the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the same time, malaria is endemic in large parts of the country and is made more prevalent when areas of the country are waterlogged. Malaria is especially dangerous for children under 5 years old and pregnant women – the very people

in part due to the violent rains and hotter weather. Now, with the loss of so much of our health infrastructure and stock of preventive and therapeutic health products, malaria and other diseases are set to spike in the coming months. **Building resilience** 

Malaria cases and deaths, which had been dropping, rose over the past few years -

## As we confront these interlocked humanitarian crises, we are faced with this question: how can we secure our future development, and in particular the

rely on it at times of great demand.

Cyclone Freddy | CREDIT: Esa Alexander/REUTERS

months to repair and restock.

who can do least against climate change.

development of our health system, against ever-threatening climate disasters? Building a resilient and sustainable health system is a painstaking effort, accompanied by many setbacks - but it is the only way we can secure the health of

our people. A health system in Africa must be resilient to survive climate disasters and pandemics, and sustainable too; we must be able to run it in the long-term and

It must coordinate closely with disaster preparedness so that even during humanitarian emergencies, it can fulfill its role.

advantage. Our people are young, energetic and endlessly inventive. We have strong communities that provide reliable foundations. We have – and I

am not boasting, I believe - among the most resilient spirits on earth. These

Ensuring a resilient and sustainable health system is every bit as tricky as it

sounds. But here is where Malawi - and the whole of Africa - has an in-built

advantages, when backed by sound data and judicious investment, are what will deliver an equitable health system that can last through the ups and downs of the present and future.

starts with the principle of decentralization, with health interventions that are brought as close to the people who need them as possible – straight into

What does a resilient and sustainable health system look like? I would say that it

Flood victims from Mtauchira village carry food donated by the Malawian government after their homes were destroyed by

communities. We already have a network of community health workers. We need more of them, and better trained and supervised. Despite the delay caused by Freddy, we must continue in our work of constructing community health centres all over the

country, in ways that are sustainable economically and environmentally.

health systems, especially those most marginalized by social stigma or

health facilities, including mobile health clinics, laboratory systems and the datacollection platforms, and of formal health workers. We need to retain, or attract back, more of our doctors, nurses, midwives and technicians. We must empower our communities to participate in their own

At the same time, we need to boost the capacities and capabilities of the existing

geographical remoteness. All this will take sustained investment that is aimed not only at short-term humanitarian or pandemic response, but at long-term development of health systems that can hold up over time. Investing in long-term health planning is one

The return - in lives saved, economic futures assured, security and wellbeing,

opportunities for infrastructure development - is enormous. And yet the ability of low-income countries to invest in such a sturdy future is constrained by the present burden of debt, which has only risen with the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise in world energy and food prices. We have some solid existing partnerships with the Global Fund, PMI, UNICEF and

others. But being able to ensure the domestic financing of health will depend on

debt relief, building new partnerships, and adopting innovative financing

instruments that are every bit as resilient, sustainable, and accessible as the

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systems for health we are building.

of the best investments that can be made.

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