

# How do Zambians understand climate change?

## Exploring what's missing in the conversation

BBC Media Action conducted focus groups to understand the perspectives of Zambian communities on climate change, specifically what they know about climate change, climate action, and role of government.

It was understood that the primary cause of climate change and the current drought in Zambia was the deforestation by farmers clearing land and businesses producing charcoal. The discussion largely focused on individual responsibility, with participants acknowledging that replanting trees or finding alternative energy sources to charcoal were the only viable actions to combat climate change. The role of the government in addressing these issues was neither mentioned nor discussed. Instead, the government's involvement was seen as limited to providing aid, ensuring food security through maize distribution, and offering compensation when mines displace communities.

### Context

Zambia has been experiencing a severe drought since January 2024. It is the worst drought that the country has experienced in the last two decades.

The 2023/2024 rainfall season was characterised by late onset, prolonged dry spells, and high temperatures. This erratic rainfall affected crop and animal farming. The prolonged dry spells in southern parts of the country coincided with vegetative and flowering stages for staple and economic crops resulting in total crop failure. A total of 982,765 hectares out of an estimated 2,272,931 hectares of maize planted have been

destroyed by the drought affecting livelihoods and food security<sup>[1]</sup>.

BBC Media Action works across Zambia with more than 30 media partners supporting them to respond to emerging needs of their audiences. This research piece was part of our ongoing monitoring activities allowing us to gain insights into perceptions and understanding of the drought and the role of the government, and more broadly climate change.

### Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in four different areas that engage in different economic activities. We also considered areas that were hit differently by the drought. These areas included

1. Chongwe – Located 30 kilometres east of the capital city, Lusaka, and largely a farming community.
2. Monze – Located in the southern part of the country and one of the areas worst hit by the drought. Locals rely on cattle and crop farming.
3. Chipata – Located in the eastern part of the country bordering Malawi. Economic activities include farming and trading.
4. Solwezi – Located in the north-western part of the country. Main economic activity is mining.

The FGDs (8 people in each group) were conducted with young people aged between 18

and 25, and adult males and females aged above 35.

The participants were taken through different and relatable hypothetical scenarios focused on three themes (mining, farming and use of alternative sources of energy) to understand their perceptions of causes and effects of climate change, as well as the role of the government in mitigating the impact of climate change.

### Key findings

**Understanding of climate change:** Participants understand climate change as the change in weather patterns that is occurring in the country. For instance, it was mentioned that rain would previously start in November, but this is changing. It was widely believed that cutting down trees and deforestation was the main cause of climate change and there was a linear association especially among farming communities that cutting down trees worsens climate outcomes, and replanting trees which may be the solution, is not possible given the drought.

Other causes less commonly mentioned in the groups were mining activities and “divine repercussions” such as “the end of times” mentioned in the bible or “a curse by the Almighty” (God).

*“Climate change has brought about new diseases for our animals and crops and reduced arable grazing land” – FGD participant, Chipata.*

**Effects of climate change:** Older generations who lived through the drought of the 1990s are acutely aware of the impact of climate on food security, with lingering fears of hunger still prevalent among this group. They recall receiving food aid from the United States during that time. Younger participants mentioned that their parents had

told them about the severe drought of the 1990s, when many families faced starvation.

Participants reported various direct effects of climate change, including the emergence of new diseases affecting crops and animals, reduced rainfall, increased heat during the hotter months, and extreme cold temperatures. Dumping sites seen as environmental issue was also associated with negative health outcomes.

*“The dumping sites in our community really affect the environment starting with the air we breathe and water for our domestic use” – participant, FGD, Monze.*

For livestock farmers, climate change has also reduced grazing land for their animals. Additionally, they noted that lower water levels in water bodies, a consequence of climate change, have led to increased loadshedding.

Some participants mentioned that trees act as windbreakers and shield their houses from the wind and heavy rains, the absence of these has caused homes to fall during heavy rains. Other effects include displacement.

*“The local people are greatly affected because they are moved from the land of their ancestors to somewhere else” – participant, FGD, Solwezi.*

**Response to climate change:** While the questions aimed to gauge where participants believe more action is needed—whether by individuals or the government—a number of responses revealed a sense of acquiescence toward climate action. For example, one respondent mentioned that climate change is a new reality that must be accepted, while others attributed the drought to divine intervention. The inability to replant trees due to the drought highlights the challenges in taking action, and the dependence of mining communities on government compensation for

displacement, as well as farming communities relying on maize support, reflects an inertia toward addressing climate change driven by lack of resources.

The availability—or lack thereof—of alternative energy sources was largely discussed as an issue of access (i.e. people cut trees because they need charcoal for cooking), with no mention of the government's role in improving access to these alternatives. Charcoal remains the primary source for cooking – yet, in the southern region, where livestock farming is prevalent, there is ongoing experimentation with biogas produced from animal dung.

Participants were familiar with solar power which was frequently mentioned for lighting and powering small-scale machines.

There was an overall lack of discussion around the role the government plays in responding strategically to climate change, to activities worsening the impact of climate change, to securing alternative sources of energy, coupled with a lack of knowledge around the national adaptation a plan, and lack of discussions around accountability and the role of government beyond service provision.

The government was referred to as the “parent” that would be able to curb the effect of climate change simply by supplying maize or paying out those who were displaced.

### ***Key implications***

There is a linear understanding of climate change linked to deforestation, with the belief that replanting trees is necessary to mitigate its effects. However, this solution is seen as unfeasible during a drought. Our own assessment is that this could be influenced by the heavy focus of the media on deforestation as a main cause of climate change –

and a lack of broader discussion in the media around the diverse causes of climate change, and where accountability lies.

Climate change is also often viewed as an inevitable phenomenon, sometimes attributed to divine intervention. There is a need to improve information provision around climate change, its causes, effects, and future impact.

The government is associated with a parental figure during crises, providing food aid and financial compensation. However, there is little to no discussion of the government's role in addressing the root causes of climate change or tackling corruption and environmental issues, which directly impacts people's livelihoods and well-being. Among farming communities, there is a noticeable lack of information on alternative farming methods. Additionally, there is limited understanding of climate change beyond the linearity of association with deforestation, coupled with a lack of knowledge around government interventions or what this ought to be beyond service provision, and a lack of knowledge of the national adaptation policy. Greater coverage of the government's role and climate accountability is needed, as well as better information on alternative farming methods to support food security among these communities

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### ***References:***

[\[1\] Zambia: Drought Response Appeal May 2024 - December 2024 \(May 2024\) | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](#)