Anticipating Drought:

Reaching the last mile through early warning messages in southern Africa

A regional case study on developing and disseminating messages to communities ahead of El Niño-induced drought

BACKGROUND

From July 2023, ahead of the predicted 2023/2024 El Niño-induced drought, the World Food Programme (WFP) activated its anticipatory action (AA) plans in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Madagascar. As part of these activations, WFP supported key interventions across the four countries, including cash-based transfers (CBT), distribution of drought-tolerant seeds, and the dissemination of Last Mile Early Warning Messages (LMEWM). LMEWM involves the timely dissemination of weather alerts and advisories to communities, particularly in vulnerable areas, to enable them to act ahead of a predicated hazard.

The LMEWM disseminated ahead of the predicted impacts of the El Niño event, reached over 1.2 million at-risk individuals ahead of the impacts of the El Niño event allowing them to make risk-informed decisions and to protect their lives and livelihoods ahead of the predicted drought (see Figure 1).

This case study highlights the process of developing and disseminating LMEWM, and documents best practices and recommendations for effective planning and implementation of LMEWM as part of an AA activation.

PEOPLE REACHED WITH LMEWM
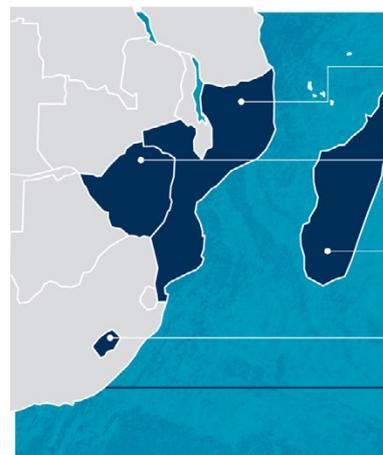
Mozambique: **270,000**

Zimbabwe: **75,000**

Madagascar: **107,700**

Lesotho: **792,877**

Total: **1.2M**

Figure 1. People reached with LMEWM

KEY ASPECTS AND BEST PRACTICES OF THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING AND DISSEMINATING LMEWM

Strengthening local capacities

Ahead of the activations, WFP supported capacity strengthening of key stakeholders involved in the LMEWM process, including National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHS), Disaster Risk Management (DRM) agencies, and agricultural ministries.

October 2024

The support focused on enhancing drought forecasting, monitoring, data analysis, and developing high-quality early warning and climate information products. Key activities included targeted training, collaboration with international research institutes, downscaling of weather forecasts, and creating comprehensive climate databases.

Best practices include the investments in capacity strengthening and collaboration between WFP, DRM agencies, NMHS, local and international partners, which were key to the success of LMEWM. Strengthening NMHS capacities led to the development of high-quality early warning products, while targeted training and system improvements enabled stakeholders to produce, interpret, and disseminate timely and accurate messages. These efforts significantly improved early warning systems and ensured that critical information reached remote communities and farmers, enhancing their preparedness and ability to make informed decisions.

Co-Development of LMEWM

The co-development process involved close collaboration among a variety of stakeholders, including NMHS, government agencies, and local institutions. The co-development and dissemination of LMEWM was tailored to each context, with advisories developed at either national, provincial, or district levels, addressing sectors such as agriculture, water, health, and nutrition. Before dissemination, messages were validated, translated into local languages, and locally customized through collaboration with communities and local actors.

One of the key lessons learned from this initiative includes the importance of involving all relevant stakeholders in the co-development process to ensure early warning messages are both relevant and effective. Deepening engagement with communities and end-users to understand their needs and how they receive LMEWM is essential to tailor messages to local contexts improve accessibility and acceptability. Enhanced inclusiveness would foster more local ownership and trust, ultimately improving the effectiveness of LMEWM.

Dissemination of LMEWM

The dissemination strategy for LMEWM was tailored to recipients' language, livelihoods, and access to technology, with dissemination methods varying across contexts to meet specific community needs. The timing of dissemination was closely coordinated with AAs, such as CBT and seed distribution, to ensure timely and complementary delivery. Once developed, messages were disseminated through a variety of channels, including traditional media (TV, radio), digital platforms (SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook), public gatherings, and Agricultural Extension Officers (AEOs).

Best practices included tailoring dissemination methods to fit local contexts, ensuring that messages reached diverse populations effectively. In some contexts, AEOs and public gatherings were key in directly communicating with communities, while innovative methods like puppet shows and radio listening groups proved effective in reaching remote communities or populations with low literacy levels. By disseminating LMEWM during CBT cycles, end-users were encouraged to utilize resources in accordance with the advisories. These dissemination efforts enhanced the reach and comprehension of LMEWM, increasing communities' ability to make informed decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFULLY DEVELOPING AND DISSEMINATING LMEWM

1. **Long-term investments in climate services:**
   - **Strengthen long-term capacities** to improve the development and delivery of LMEWM and ensure integration between sectors through established structures.
   - **Invest in continuous training** for NMHS staff, Agricultural Extension Officers, and other stakeholders to enhance collaboration and efficiency.

2. Enhancing Partnerships:

- **Establish long-term partnerships** and agreements early in the planning process to prevent delays and ensure smooth collaboration, aligning with the time-sensitive nature of LMEWM.

3. Promoting Inclusivity:

- **Understand and address vulnerabilities** to ensure LMEWMs are inclusive, gender-sensitive, and responsive to diverse needs.
- **Incorporate continuous feedback** to adapt LMEWMs to evolving community needs and climate risks.

4. Optimizing Collaboration:

- **Co-Develop LMEW in a timely manner and encourage cross-sector collaboration** to enhance stakeholder engagement and deliver actionable, coherent and sector specific advisories.
- **Decentralize collaboration** to involve local communities and foster stronger ownership and trust.

5. Enhancing Dissemination:

- **Use multiple channels** - community radios, social media, public gatherings - to broaden the reach of LMEWMs. Regularly disseminate climate information to maintain awareness and improve uptake.
- **Regularly provide climate services**, beyond activation periods, to build familiarity and trust amongst end-users, and to raise awareness within communities, contributing to the effective adoption of LMEWM.

6. Building Trust in LMEWMs:

- **Ensure the accuracy of LMEWMs** and their consistent dissemination.

- **Simplify technical language** to enhance understanding and reduce misinterpretation.
- **Integrate local knowledge** to enhance trust in rural communities.

MOVING FORWARD

Following these recommendations are crucial to strengthen LMEW systems, particularly for the most vulnerable populations. By investing in climate services, enhancing inclusiveness through co-development, and ensuring consistent and effective dissemination of climate information, communities can be empowered to make informed decisions, ultimately strengthening their food security and community resilience to climate-related hazards.