



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



OCHA



World Food
Programme

Saving lives, time and money

Evidence from anticipatory action

May 2025





We are in uncharted territory. An existential funding crisis, soaring levels of humanitarian need and a spiralling number of extreme weather events. Each dollar we spend must go further.

There is key evidence showing that anticipatory action provides a cost-effective and efficient way for life-saving assistance that addresses humanitarian needs while strengthening resilience to predictable risks.

Strong interagency coordination amplifies these benefits by improving resource allocation, reducing duplication of efforts, and fostering a more cohesive and timelier, prioritized response.

The non-exhaustive list of findings outlined below is drawn from evidence generated by a number of organizations, reflecting broad insights and experiences from across the sector.

» Anticipatory action saves money

- | Every USD 1 invested in anticipatory action yields up to **USD 7 in avoided losses** and added benefits, confirming its value for money, according to a study across ten countries.¹
- | In Kenya, the distribution of animal feed ahead of the drought peak in 2017 resulted in a cost-benefit ratio of 3.5, meaning that for every USD 1 invested in emergency livestock support, households received **a benefit of USD 3.5**.²
- | In Bangladesh, anticipatory action ahead of floods in 2020 reached people at **half the cost** of regular rapid response: USD 13 per person compared with USD 26 in 2019.³
- | In Southern Africa, conservative estimates from the 2023–2024 El Niño-induced drought indicate that investments in anticipatory actions yielded assisted populations a **30-percent net benefit** over traditional response – meaning that USD 1 provided before the drought had the same impact as USD 1.3 provided later.⁴
- | In Nepal, a modeled return on investment analysis over a 20-year period estimated that USD 1 invested in anticipatory action against flood could **save approximately USD 35** in future emergency response costs (e.g. fewer impact assessments, smaller residual caseloads, lower transfer values).⁵
- | In the Horn of Africa, proactive drought responses **could have saved 30 percent of humanitarian aid** spending (USD 1.6 billion) and another USD 2.6 billion in lost incomes and assets.⁶
- | **Anticipatory action helps to avoid inflation and shortages.** Pre-crisis prices are lower than crisis prices, for example procuring animal feed before flooding is 15 percent cheaper in Bangladesh than during a flood.⁷
- | In South Sudan, protecting a road and transporting supplies before flooding was **four times cheaper** than airlifting them after.⁸
- | Prevention versus treatment:
 - a. **Diseases:** Preventing a large cholera outbreak is **ten times cheaper** than responding to one. Early anticipatory action costs USD 250 000, but this cost multiplies more than tenfold if the outbreak spreads.⁹
 - b. **Nutrition:** The cost of treating a child suffering from malnutrition is **50 times higher** than the cost of preventative interventions.¹⁰
 - c. **Livestock:** Feeding a goat before a crisis is **four times cheaper** than replacing one.¹¹





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» Anticipatory action saves time

- | In 2024, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocated USD 6.2 million **within just 16 minutes of early warning flood alerts** in Bangladesh, complementing USD 2.3 million from partners. Together, the United Nations, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, the government and others reached some 500 000 people with assistance **within five days of the warning** and ahead of peak monsoon flood impacts in the Jamuna River basin. In contrast, in 2019, assistance was provided three months after peak flooding.¹²
- | In Southern Africa (2023–2024), anticipatory actions reached populations at risk of drought **6 to 10 months earlier** compared to the 2024 El Niño response interventions, reducing the need for negative coping mechanisms.¹³
- | In Afghanistan, anticipatory actions started **eight months before** the La Niña-induced drought emergency was declared in June 2021, in this way mitigating the worst impacts.¹⁴
- | In Mongolia, anticipatory action against harsh winter (dzud) of 2017/18 was implemented **four months before** standard emergency response. The time saved translated into avoided loss of livestock assets and strengthened resilience of herder livelihoods.¹⁵
- | In Nepal, it took **6 minutes** to release funds from CERF to agencies after the early warning trigger for flooding in 2024.¹⁶ In early 2025, it took **13 minutes** to provide funding from CERF to partners days ahead of Tropical Cyclone Jude's landfall.¹⁷

» Anticipatory action saves lives and livelihoods

- | **People’s lives are saved.** In Somalia (2023), effective early warning and anticipatory action ahead of the El Niño-related floods resulted in substantially lower loss of life than in previous events, with approximately 118 deaths recorded against 2 300 deaths in a comparable event in 1997.¹⁸
- | **People’s food security is improved.**
 - a. Impact evaluations in Bangladesh (2024) and Nepal (2022) show that people who received cash ahead of floods experienced less hunger, better mental health and skipped fewer meals than those who received this assistance weeks or months after the peak flooding.¹⁹
 - b. In Afghanistan, anticipatory actions ahead of the 2021 La Niña-induced drought showed significant food security benefits. Families with acceptable levels of food consumption increased from a baseline of 6 percent to over 50 percent following the intervention.²⁰
- | **People’s nutritious diets are maintained.** In the Sudan, anticipatory actions related to the 2017 drought – such as livestock vaccinations, distribution of animal feed and training on destocking – helped each agropastoral household to consume an additional 0.8 litre of milk per day. Milk and dairy products significantly enhance nutrition, especially for children under 5 years of age, with 0.5 litre per day representing 25 percent of daily calories and 65 percent of daily protein requirements.²¹
- | **People’s food and essential supplies are stocked.** In Ethiopia, people who received cash assistance ahead of predicted drought in 2022 were able to buy food, animal health products and feed at cheaper prices, which helped them to reduce hunger and livestock mortality due to lack of pasture and livestock diseases caused by the drought.²²
- | **People have the resources to evacuate or secure their homes.** In Bangladesh, households who received assistance ahead of the 2024 flood – such as cash, cattle feed, waterproof silo drums and hygiene kits – were able to evacuate, consume food, protect their possessions and livestock from rising water and stay clean and healthy.²³
- | **People can access safe drinking water.** In Somalia, the construction and rehabilitation of water points ahead of the 2020–2022 drought increased the number of people with access to a functioning water point from 22 percent to 89 percent.²⁴
- | **People’s incomes are protected.** In the Niger, families who received assistance ahead of the 2022 drought were not forced to migrate to find income. Cash enabled families to purchase food, protect livestock and keep children in school.²⁵
- | **People’s agricultural productivity is improved.** In Honduras, the anticipatory activation related to the El Niño-induced drought in 2023–2024 assisted vulnerable farmers to achieve 40-percent higher maize yields and increased milk production of their livestock of 0.25 litre per day.²⁶



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» Anticipatory action enhances resilience, self-reliance and dignity

| **People avoid falling into vicious debt cycles.** In the Philippines, the distribution of drought-tolerant seeds ahead of the exceptionally dry 2019 agricultural season prevented farmers from buying seeds on credit with interest rates up to 15 percent.²⁷

| **People's health is better.** In the Niger (2022), tens of thousands of people avoided drought-related illness through early rehabilitation of drinking supply systems, easier access to healthcare and water.²⁸

| **Children can remain in school.** In Ethiopia, cash assistance ahead of the drought in 2021 prevented 13 000 children from dropping out of school. Education is critical to reducing poverty, improving health outcomes and future economic stability.²⁹

| **Women and girls are safer, and their dignity is protected.**

- a. In Somalia, women and girls who received cash assistance ahead of the 2021 drought used it to purchase sanitary items, medicine, school fees, food and transport to services and water sites. They reported less tension and violence in the home thanks to this support.³⁰
- b. In the Philippines, 40 percent of farmers benefiting from anticipatory actions ahead of the 2018–2019 El Niño-induced drought were women. For many, it was the first time they were directly contributing to the household income, reporting that this boosted their self-esteem, increased financial independence and eased pressure on male family members as sole earners.³¹

| **People's quality of life is improved.** In Madagascar, 80 percent of people receiving support ahead of forecast drought in 2023 felt better prepared to manage it, reporting improved mental well-being.³²

| **People's key productive assets are protected.** In Lesotho, anticipatory assistance increased the proportion of people who did not have to adopt negative livelihood coping mechanisms (e.g. selling livestock) by 12 percentage points, and reduced consumption-based coping mechanisms (e.g. skipping meals) by 2.4 points.³³



| **People want to confront disasters on their own terms.** A Ground Truth Solutions study in Chad and Nigeria showed that people in crisis strongly agree that 'prevention is better than cure' and that early assistance is critical. People see benefits to acting ahead of natural hazards in their communities.³⁴

| **Social cohesion is increased.** In Colombia (2018), anticipatory actions against drought strengthened social cohesion among Venezuelan migrants, Colombian returnees and residents, with 74 percent of households participating in community production centres reporting improved community relations – nearly double that of non-assisted households.³⁵

Notes

Anticipatory action saves money

- ¹ **FAO.** 2023. *The Impact of Disasters on Agriculture and Food Security 2023 – Avoiding and reducing losses through investment in resilience.* Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7900en>
- ² **FAO.** 2018. *Horn of Africa. Impact of Early Warning Early Action. Protecting pastoralist livelihoods ahead of drought.* Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/ca0227en>
- ³ **CERF.** 2020. *CERF allocation report on the use of funds and achieved results: Bangladesh rapid response anticipatory action pilot flood 2020.* Dhaka. https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/20-RR-BGD-44022_Bangladesh_CERF_Report.pdf
- ⁴ **De Brauw, Alan.** 2025. *Cost effectiveness of anticipatory action: Lesotho, Madagascar, and Mozambique. CGIAR initiative on fragility, conflict and migration. Technical report.* Montpellier, France. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/173370>
- ⁵ **WFP.** 2019. *Forecast-based Financing in Nepal: A Return on Investment Study.* Rome. <https://shorturl.at/qzNKu>
- ⁶ **USAID.** 2018. *Economics of Resilience to Drought in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.* Washington D.C. <https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/economics-resilience-drought-ethiopia-kenya-and-somalia>
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- ¹² **UNOCHA.** 2025. *A race against floods in Bangladesh.* In: UNOCHA. [Cited 23 April 2025]. <https://shorturl.at/l7qiE>
- ¹³ **WFP.** 2025. *Anticipating the impact of drought in Lesotho. Key findings from the Anticipatory Action activation 2023/24.* Rome. <https://shorturl.at/eCt2v>
- ¹⁴ **FAO.** 2023. *Afghanistan: Impact of Anticipatory action – Curbing La Niña-induced drought.* Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8141en>
- ¹⁵ **FAO.** 2018. *Mongolia. Impact of Early Warning Early Action – Protecting the livelihoods of herders from a dzud winter.* Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/ca2181en>
- ¹⁶ **CERF.** 2024. *CERF Anticipatory Action Update – November 2024.* New York, USA. <https://shorturl.at/ZSfeB>
- ¹⁷ **Anticipation Hub.** 2025. *OCHA and UN CERF support anticipatory action ahead of Tropical Cyclone Jude in Mozambique.* In: *Anticipation Hub.* [Cited 23 April 2025]. <https://shorturl.at/Dtgqm>

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- ²³ **UNOCHA.** 2025. *A race against floods in Bangladesh.* In: UNOCHA. [Cited 23 April 2025]. <https://www.unocha.org/news/race-against-floods-bangladesh>
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- ²⁸ **UNOCHA.** 2024. *Impact Story. Breaking the cycle of negative coping strategies. Lessons from anticipatory action in Niger 2022.* New York, USA. <https://shorturl.at/cC1YF>
- ²⁹ **UNOCHA.** 2024. *Acting early when the world isn’t watching: Lessons from anticipatory action in Ethiopia in 2021.* New York, USA. <https://shorturl.at/lbefq>
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REQUIRED CITATION

FAO, OCHA and WFP. 2025. *Saving lives, time and money – Evidence from anticipatory action, May 2025*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd5250en>

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