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Step 7: Narrow and prioritize list of early action

Once you have used the methods outlined above to prioritize impacts and identify early actions, it is time to determine which actions are most feasible and most likely to reduce suffering and losses.

There is no “right way” to prioritize early actions. There are many criteria that you can apply to assess and rank early actions and to guide you in your selection process. The list below contains criteria other National Societies have found helpful in evaluating and prioritizing early actions. These criteria can be applied across different anticipatory action approaches; however, they are particularly important when developing a simplified or full Early Action Protocol. Click on the link for examples of how the different criteria could benefit the prioritization of early actions. When developing an s/EAP for submission to the Anticipatory Pillar of the IFRC-DREF, the Validation Committee will explicitly use the following criteria when assessing your s/EAP:

(1) Evidence base: provide an evidence base for your selected early actions and reference to academic research, empirical studies, interviews with key informants/experts, among other sources of evidence. You may also consult the evidence database, which collates the findings from empirical studies of anticipatory action. Providing such evidence strengthens the justification for early actions in any anticipatory action approach and is particularly important for the validation of a full EAP.

(2) Feasibility: the implementation process shows that each step of the activation has been thought through and considered and that implementation in the lead time available is possible. When developing an s/EAP, the National Society capacity section will require you to demonstrate that the National Society has the capacity to deliver the action in terms of operational, thematic and administrative capacity, in terms of alignment with strategies of the National Society, and in terms of capacity to advance funds.

(3) No regrets/do no harm: describe how the selected actions contribute to the well-being of the population even if the expected event does not materialize. Beyond s/EAP development, this principle is crucial for all anticipatory action initiatives, regardless of the chosen approach.

(4) Lifespan of prepositioned items: To ensure the feasibility of the rapid distribution of items in the short timeframe between forecast and event, prepositioning of goods may be necessary. When planning prepositioning for an s/EAP, prepositioned items should have a lifetime of at least the lifecycle of the s/EAP and should only be replenished after an activation.

In addition to these criteria, the following methods may help you to prioritize your early actions:

- (Participatory) Stakeholder workshops
- Consult secondary data on effectiveness and evidence
- Community (or stakeholder) ranking activities

Additional considerations for the selection of early actions:

When developing an s/EAP, reflecting on the criteria above is a crucial part of the process in order to get your s/EAP approved. Below you find a list of additional considerations that might help you determine which early actions might be suitable choices in your context.

Policy fit

Question to ask yourself

- Is the action consistent with government policies and/or other institutional contingency plans?

Example of Policy Fit: Cash transfers in Mozambique

When the cyclone EAP was being developed in Mozambique, the National Institute for Disaster Management – the government agency overseeing disaster response – did not allow cash transfers. This meant that although cash transfers could theoretically have been used to mitigate many cyclones impact before a storm hits, the National Society could not include cash transfers in the EAP. Following cyclone Idai in March 2019, the government began making changes to these policies. This means that cash transfers may be an option for future EAPs in Mozambique.

Complementarity

Question to ask yourself

- Does the action complement or build upon early actions already implemented or planned by other actors?

Complementarity refers to ensuring that selected early actions build on, reinforce, or strategically complement anticipatory action or disaster risk management activities already implemented by governments, communities, and other organizations. In many countries, government disaster management agencies, UN agencies, NGOs, local organizations or communities may already implement or work on anticipatory action related to the same hazard and / or impacts. When selecting early actions, you should therefore assess

what actions already exist or have previously been implemented and consider how your initiative can complement rather than duplicate these efforts. Complementarity may involve filling operational gaps, reinforcing actions implemented by other actors, or focusing on areas where the National Society has a comparative advantage.

Scale

Question to ask yourself

- Can this action be set up and implemented at the desired scale?

Examples of Scaling

Uganda

Uganda was the first anticipatory action pilot focused on a small geographical area. After test activations and further analysis, it was acknowledged that anticipatory action systems for National Societies are most effective if they can be implemented anywhere that a forecast predicts severe impact. For example, in the event of an impending flood, impact-based forecasts will tell the National Society which communities are likely to be most severely impacted so they can act accordingly. Given this approach, it is essential to understand if the National Society has the capacity to implement the selected early action in all the potential locations that can be impacted.

Mozambique

During consultations, stakeholders in Mozambique identified evacuation support as a way to bring people to safety before floods or cyclones. However, in developing the theory of change, they realized that, given current capacities, it would be impossible for Mozambique Red Cross to put agreements in place nation-wide to assist people with transport. As they could not predict exactly where evacuation assistance and transport would be necessary, the National Society abandoned evacuation assistance and agreed to revisit it, should national shelter or evacuation systems change.

Evidence of effectiveness

Question to ask yourself

- Is there evidence that the action would be effective in reducing the prioritized impact(s)?

The quantity and quality of evidence for potential early actions varies greatly. Some interventions, such as water purification and mosquito nets, have been tested in a variety of humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts. Many, however, have not been tested as early actions (implemented in the short window of time before an extreme event).

In such cases, evidence from effectiveness in other contexts can be used to extrapolate potential effectiveness as an early action. For example, if an action is difficult to execute properly over a longer timeframe, it is unlikely to be viable for short-term implementation.

Although still limited, there is a growing volume of evidence and studies about the effectiveness of certain early actions. Links to rigorous studies of the effectiveness of anticipatory action can be found on the Anticipation Hub [Evidence database](#).

Approved EAP summaries with an overview of different early actions can be also found on the [dFRC website](#).

Examples of Evidence of effectiveness

Mongolia

In Mongolia, the Mongolia Red Cross assisted 2,000 herder households with unrestricted cash grants of USD 100 in December 2017 and with animal care kits delivered to the pastoralists in January 2018. Research showed that providing tailored animal care kits and a small unconditional cash grant in anticipation of extreme winter and drought conditions – known as dzud – was effective in reducing livestock mortality by roughly 50% and increased offspring survival rates.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, a test intervention in 2017 demonstrated that families who received cash transfers ahead of floods accrued significantly less high-interest debt, otherwise a common coping strategy, and experienced less psychosocial stress during and after the flood period; they also had more reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food (for more information, see [Gros, et al. \(2017\)](#)).

Feasibility

Question to ask yourself

- Is there evidence that the action is feasible?

The two key aspects of feasibility are the time required and access considerations:

- Is it possible to execute the action effectively with the given forecast lead-time?

- Are there any factors (road or travel conditions, conflict/security, social tensions) that could interfere with access to the communities and hence successful implementation?

The capacity of the National Society is also closely linked to feasibility. In approaches where anticipatory action is implemented jointly with government actors or community-based actors, the capacities of these actors should also be considered when assessing feasibility.

Social acceptability

Question to ask yourself

- Is the proposed action something the community will support?

Example of social acceptability: Taking houses apart before a storm

Mozambique

Some actions, while effective, might not be something communities are willing to engage in. During conversations with shelter experts, it was suggested that deconstructing houses and storing the most valuable components, such as windows, doors, and metal roofing, might be a good way to reduce losses during cyclones or floods. An action such as this can only be effective if the community also believes the work entailed is worth the potential risk or reward. When the CVM team conducted focus groups, one high-risk community was already doing something similar, however, many others felt that such an action was too time consuming and was unlikely to be effective. If only a few communities are likely to cooperate with your early action, it is unlikely to be successful overall. Therefore, before including actions that might meet community resistance in an anticipatory action initiative, it is essential to consult with a large sample of potential beneficiaries to ensure the action is socially acceptable.

Capacity to implement

Question to ask yourself

- Does the National Society have the institutional capacity (thematic, logistic, administrative, financial, human resource) to implement the action effectively given the lead time and scale?

In cases where anticipatory action is implemented in partnership with government agencies, community-based structures or other operational partners, it is also important to assess the capacities, roles and, where applicable, mandates of these actors to ensure that responsibilities are clearly defined and feasible.

Value for money/efficiency

Question to ask yourself

- How does the cost for the action compare to the expected (or proven) benefit? Are there other actions that could achieve the same impact for less?

Example of Value for Money/Efficiency: Water tanks vs. individual supplies for water purification

In some cases, different actions may aim to address the same anticipated impact – but with varying levels of cost, complexity, and effectiveness. In Mozambique, for example, the team explored options to supply at-risk communities with clean water and reduce the risk of waterborne diseases. One proposed action involved the installation of large water tanks at central locations, while another suggested the distribution of household-level water purification kits, such as chlorine tablets and jerry cans. While both options targeted similar impacts, the water tank installation involved significantly higher logistical costs, whereas the household kits were easier to procure, store, and distribute. Although comprehensive cost-effectiveness data is not always available, the Mozambique example demonstrates how to use available evidence and consultations to assess which option offers better value for money. Whenever possible, National Societies should compare the anticipated benefit of different interventions against their relative cost to maximize the benefits of available funding for anticipatory action. This consideration is particularly relevant when designing early actions for an s/EAP as these come with predefined budget caps but can also support decision-making in other anticipatory action approaches where resources may be limited.

Alignment with organizational mandate and priorities

Question to ask yourself

- Does the National Society or other organization implementing early actions have the mandate, expertise, and authority to implement the action?

Example of alignment

The National Society does not have expertise or the mandate to protect roads or bridges. This is often the mandate of a government line ministry such as Ministry of Transportation or Ministry of Infrastructure. While this may be a priority for at risk

communities, it is outside the mandate of most National Societies. In such cases, national Societies may instead support government actors through coordination, advocacy, or complementary actions that fall within their mandate.

Timing

Question to ask yourself

- Is the action beneficial at any time of the year, or does it depend on when the event occurs?

Example of timing: Harvesting crops before a flood

Some actions, while potentially very beneficial and effective, may only be possible during a very short window of time. For example, harvesting crops to save them before they are damaged may only be relevant / effective if the event occurs when crops are close to maturity. Because a cyclone or flood may hit at any time during the season, the team in Mozambique decided not to include this in their EAP. Another option might also have been to make certain actions dependent upon the precise timing or season, only activating those actions when the timing would make sense. The potential benefit of such seasonal actions would then have to be weighed against the administrative and readiness costs of preparing for many different early actions.

Such considerations are particularly important for s/EAPs where early actions are clearly defined in advance, but they can also inform anticipatory action embedded in community-based or government-led disaster risk management systems.

Action lifetime

Question to ask yourself

- How long will the action benefit people?

Example: Shelter strengthening and mosquito nets

When planning your action, it is important to consider how long the action can and should benefit the people. For example, if you intend to distribute water purification kits so that people have access to clean water immediately after the event until response aid arrives, you need to consider how long such a response usually takes. If not, people may run out and resort to drinking dirty water anyway, rendering your action less effective.

There are also other elements to consider regarding the action lifetime. In the case of materials to reinforce shelters, it is probably unrealistic to assume that materials distributed during one cyclone season will be available for use in the next season. Mosquito nets, on the other hand, have an average life of 3 years in many contexts. If your activity is contingent upon specific training or skills to be effective, how long can people be expected to remember what they learn? Determine how long you need your materials or actions to benefit people and adjust your actions accordingly.

Benefit of acting early

Question to ask yourself

- How long until the action has benefit? Is early action necessary to get the benefit, or could the action be done after the event?

Example: Timing of early actions to take effect

Some early actions may be executed quickly but take time to take effect. For example, alpaca vaccinations begin to take effect after a few days. Anticipatory vaccination can therefore reinforce animal health before the impacts of cold and wind and provide benefits before response usually reaches remote villages.

In cases where the impact of an action is not felt for weeks after a disaster, traditional response might be more efficient and easier to target. However, if certain areas are known to be cut off from supply routes (e.g. flooding affects roads and transport) early action may reduce the need for air support or complicated logistics. If the action can be executed just as efficiently and effectively through existing early warning and response systems or immediately following an event there may be no reason to risk acting in vain.

Assessing whether the timing advantage of anticipatory action provides a clear benefit is therefore an important step across different anticipatory action approaches.

No regret actions

Question to ask yourself

- Will people still benefit from the action even if the event does not occur?

It is the nature of anticipatory action that sometimes a forecasted event will not occur as expected or will deviate to a new location. For this reason, you may end up “acting in vain.” When developing an s/EAP, the template asks you to consider how your proposed actions will help people if a projected disaster does not strike. Materials from a shelter kit, for example, might be repurposed or used for general repairs. Water purification materials can be kept for a future flood event. Because people can use unrestricted cash for whatever they choose, households will find a use for it no matter how the situation unfolds.

Be aware that acting in vain can affect National Society credibility or reputation. Repeatedly performing large-scale evacuations in vain might not be beneficial over time. This consideration is crucial across anticipatory action approaches, particularly when actions are highly visible or require significant community mobilization.

Do no harm/avoid generating new risks

Question to ask yourself

- Will the selected action be in line with the principle of *Do No Harm*? Will the selected action create new risk?

In fragile contexts, people may be targeted because of assistance they receive, or people may hear of the support and come from nearby communities with the expectation of also accessing support. Displaced people may be more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Migration of this kind can also increase tensions within communities and strain local services and resources, potentially increasing vulnerability to external shocks. These considerations apply as well when anticipatory action is implemented through community-based initiatives or in collaboration with government actors, where actions may affect broader social or institutional dynamics.

Example: COVID-19

Bangladesh

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a cyclone struck Bangladesh, activating the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society's (BDRCS) EAP (see more info [here](#)). Assistance with evacuation to cyclone shelters was one of the early actions, but encouraging people to congregate with strangers ran counter to public health guidance encouraging social distancing. To mitigate these risks, BDRCS added personal protective equipment and WASH support for evacuees to their interventions to reduce the risk of spreading COVID.

Environmental sustainability

Question to ask yourself

- Will the selected early action minimize environmental harm and avoid creating additional environmental risk or waste as far as possible?

Environmental sustainability refers to considering the potential environmental impacts of early actions and selecting options that minimize environmental harm wherever possible. Early actions may reduce environmental risks, for example by preventing contamination or resource depletion, but they can also unintentionally create environmental impacts through logistics, procurement, waste generation, or pressure on natural resources. When selecting early actions, you should therefore consider how environmental impacts can be minimized and whether more sustainable alternatives are available. At the same time, environmental considerations must be carefully balanced with humanitarian outcomes, the lived realities of at-risk communities, and the primary objective of anticipatory action to protect lives and livelihoods from the humanitarian impacts of predictable shocks.

Examples from Lesotho and Lebanon:

When developing an Early Action Protocol for cold waves in Lesotho, one of the potential early actions discussed was the use of salt for gritting roads. However, the team identified significant environmental concerns and ultimately did not select the early action. In addition to selecting early actions, environmental sustainability can also influence how early actions are implemented. When designing heatwave kits, the Lebanese Red Cross chose to include reusable water bottles rather than distributing single-use bottled water. This approach reduced plastic waste while ensuring access to safe drinking water during heat alerts. Finally, procuring items for in-kind anticipatory assistance locally wherever possible, is always good practice to reduce logistics-related emissions.

Budgetary constraints regarding prepositioning

Question to ask yourself

- Do you have sufficient budget to procure all the items that need to be prepositioned? If not, how will this gap be filled?

Depending on the hazard, there may be only a few days between activation and the extreme event. If early actions depend on relief items that cannot be procured on short notice, prepositioning might be necessary. For s/EAPs financed through the Anticipatory Pillar of the IFRC-DREF, up to 65 percent of the budget to be used for readiness and stock. Hence, if your early action consists in prepositioning of items for an amount that go beyond this percentage, either different early actions need to be identified, or stocks financed by other sources or other procurement arrangements (e.g. virtual warehouses) made. For other anticipatory action

approaches, prepositioning arrangements may differ and can include collaboration with government warehouses, community-based stock systems, or integration with existing disaster preparedness mechanisms.

Lifetime of prepositioned relief items

Question to ask yourself

- Can the prepositioned items be stored for the valid lifetime of the s/EAP (five years for the EAP or two years for the sEAP respectively)? If not, how will items be replaced if they expire before an activation or revalidation?

An IFRC-DREF approved EAP can have two activations within the five year lifespan before it needs to be revised and resubmitted for another five years and a full budget allocation. An IFRC-DREF approved sEAP can only be activated once, this finishes the sEAP and then it needs to be revised and resubmitted for another two years and a full budget allocation. If the early actions you are considering depend on the use of prepositioned goods, it is important that these items do not perish before the five or two years are over. For other approaches to anticipatory action, rules for prepositioning might be less rigid, since prepositioning may be done jointly with government structures or within communities, if at all applicable.

Example: Distributing hay and veterinary kits

Peru

In an early phase of anticipatory action programming, Peru tested distributing hay and veterinary kits to herder families in the Andes. One of the priority impacts of cold waves is that alpacas lack access to grass and become susceptible to diseases, leading herders to lose their animals. Hay and dried concentrated food would have needed to be prepositioned to ensure availability at short notice. As both items' shelf lives were less than five years, there was a risk they would spoil before the EAP was activated, and they could not be included in the EAP.



Practical guidance: Challenges in prioritizing impacts and actions – verifying and weighing stakeholder perceptions

While key informants have valuable insight into their contexts, people may also have beliefs based upon misinformation or make assumptions about cause and effect and the severity of impacts that are not supported by systematic data. For this reason, you should always seek to verify data from as many data streams as possible (e.g. focus groups and databases). A lack of data does not automatically mean people's observations are wrong, but it is always best to validate stakeholder perceptions using secondary data, when possible.

For example, humanitarians will often prioritize reducing loss of life over other impacts. However, it may be that, overall, the event in question causes few deaths on average. Early warning messages alone may be successful in reducing mortality, and it may be difficult to predict and prevent remaining fatalities. In such cases, the decision to focus early action financing on preventing immediate loss of life may still make sense, but the decision to do so should at least be informed by critical evaluation of actual mortality rates and the likelihood of reducing it. Understanding patterns in mortality and the circumstances contributing to fatalities can help determine whether anticipatory action is likely to reduce these impacts effectively.

In another example, stakeholders often believe that flooding leads to an increase in diseases (such as cholera), leading to additional hardships such as loss of income or time out from school. National health statistics, however, may reveal that overall caseloads and mortality rates remain the same or are more closely related to other factors. This data could be incomplete; however, it should be presented to stakeholders and considered along with stakeholder perceptions when determining which impacts to address and early actions to take.

If stakeholder priorities are contradicted by evidence, it may be appropriate to try to influence those priorities. When contradictory data does not exist, is not seen as reliable, or is not readily available, it may be necessary to rely more heavily on qualitative data and stakeholder perceptions.

Taken together, the criteria above provide a practical framework for systematically assessing and prioritizing early actions. While some of these criteria are explicitly required when developing an s/EAP, the same considerations can also guide anticipatory action planning in community-based initiatives, imminent DREF operations, or systems coordinated by the government.



Example of applying the criteria: the process in Mozambique

It is unrealistic to assume there could be a fixed, context-independent order in which criteria can or should be applied. The team in Mozambique found it impossible to apply these criteria in a linear fashion. Instead, they considered potential early actions using an iterative process of narrowing actions, focusing on promising interventions, collecting additional data, and then reconsidering actions against the background of newly acquired knowledge. The discussion below provides examples of how the above criteria were applied in Mozambique to gradually arrive at the most realistic and beneficial early actions.

In Mozambique, certain criteria were particularly useful in immediately reducing the field of potential early actions and focusing future research. These include *policy fit*, *alignment with organizational mandate and priorities*, *capacity to implement*, and *feasibility*.

Policy fit was an essential consideration in Mozambique because, cash transfers – an area of action of particular interest in anticipatory action programming – were explicitly prohibited under Mozambican laws at the time. While cash-transfer actions might be effective in reducing the impacts of floods and cyclones in Mozambique, the team elected not to spend time investigating early actions that would not be possible within the project timeline. If cash-based interventions become an option in the future, further work will be needed to explore feasibility and to develop theories of change.

In Mozambique, two criteria – *alignment with organizational mandate and priorities* and whether CVM had the *capacity to implement* the action – were interrelated. National Societies are the default recipients of IFRC anticipation funding. As Red Cross staff and volunteers in Mozambique do not have the experience nor the mandate to attempt to reinforce public infrastructure or power lines, any early actions in these sectors would be better planned by the government transportation authority and funded by other means. For this reason, actions related to reinforcing roads, bridges, and electrical lines were eliminated from consideration early on.

Feasibility is likely to be an essential criterion in any context. If the action cannot be performed given the forecast lead time, it should not be considered. However, if no one has tried your intervention, it may not be immediately clear whether an action could be successfully implemented within the given timeframe. This was the case for shelter reinforcements in Mozambique. Because damage to houses is a major impact of cyclones according to historical data and stakeholders at all levels, CVM elected to conduct simulations to see whether the Red Cross volunteers could distribute materials, conduct trainings, and execute the actions within the time afforded by the forecasts.

The *scale* at which action could be successfully set up and executed was also critical in Mozambique. Providing families with evacuation assistance for themselves, their animals, and their belongings might have increased rates of evacuation as well as loss of life and livelihoods, but CVM did not have the capacity to develop transportation agreements for all communities that might be affected by a cyclone. Such an action would be more feasible to set up within specific communities rather than on a national scale, and it was therefore ruled out.

Criteria, such as the *timing* of the action or *social acceptability*, were only applied once other criteria were met. It was determined that helping people to harvest their crops before a storm would be too difficult because it would require setting up cash-for-work systems in a short period. In terms of timing, it would also only be a viable action if the flood or hurricane hit late in the growing season. The possibility of deconstructing houses to store and save expensive components only arose in later conversations with experts, therefore the social acceptability at the community level was not explored until later in the process of defining actions.

While demonstrating *evidence of effectiveness* is desirable, because anticipatory was at that time and continues to be in some contexts a relatively new concept, there is little definitive evidence for many actions. Considering this, CVM tried to build an evidence base for anticipatory shelter reinforcements by testing the intervention in its protocol.

Finally, some criteria were briefly considered but were not useful in the Mozambican context. *Value for money / efficiency*, for example, could only be considered when there was reliable, comparable data regarding the relative costs and effectiveness of different interventions seeking to address the same impact. This data was generally unavailable, but it was factored into decision-making when available. For example, the team considered evidence that installing large water tanks requires higher logistical costs than household distribution water purification kits.

After completing the process of identifying priority impacts, considering each action in relation to the criteria above, eliminating the actions that do not meet key criteria, identifying gaps in knowledge, collecting additional information, and reassessing the options (as many times as necessary) your team will eventually be left with the actions that make the most sense in your context.



Accounting for challenges and limitations in fragile and conflict-affected settings

Fragility, conflict and violence (FCV) can affect the feasibility and suitability of early actions, influencing many of the selection criteria outlined above. Most notably, they can lead to very practical challenges or limitations on different actions. For example, a planned evacuation route may no longer be safe due to an outbreak of violence, or cash-based assistance is no longer effective as economic fragility disrupted local markets. The toolkit on anticipatory action in FCV settings contains an extensive inventory of potential challenges and suitable adjustments or contingency plans for different types of early actions, addressing challenges related to: humanitarian access; disruption of critical infrastructure; insecurity; displacement; corruption; loss of trust; weak governance structures; constraints to data availability; social tensions; and the specific characteristics and vulnerabilities of different population groups at risk. The toolkit also addresses conflict-sensitive early action planning, taking into account different types of harm early actions may inadvertently do.

For more information, consult AA in FCV Toolkit Module 5 in the [toolbox](#).