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07. Select early actions

Summary

Early actions are at the heart of anticipatory action and of each s/EAP. In the case of s/EAPs, National Societies must demonstrate that the actions proposed will reduce key impacts and are feasible given the forecast lead time. It is therefore critical to devote time and attention to identifying impacts, to prioritizing those that can and should be addressed through anticipatory action, and to identifying and operationalizing early actions that will help at-risk populations mitigate negative impacts. Careful identification, prioritization, and selection of early actions helps ensure that actions:

- Reduce priority risks
- Are adapted to the local context
- Are feasible to implement in the lead time before the extreme event with the capacities and resources at hand
- Align with the priorities of communities, local disaster risk management actors (e.g. local governments or NGOs) and relevant preparedness plans
- Fit within government disaster risk management policies and regulations.

This chapter outlines a recursive process for identifying and selecting early actions that can be implemented ahead of predicted hazards. While the process is particularly designed to support the development of s/EAPs funded through the Anticipatory Pillar of the IFRC-DREF, many of the steps and considerations described are also relevant for other anticipatory action approaches.

Regardless of the chosen approach, the steps below – implemented iteratively – will help you to answer the following key questions:

- What are the main impacts caused by the hazard in question?
- What early actions will best reduce these impacts)?
- Which of these early actions are currently feasible given the existing context and organizational capacities?

Because s/EAPs require explicit justification and validation, the steps and criteria in this chapter are presented in a structured and evidence-based way. When applying this guidance in other anticipatory action approaches, the same principles may still apply, but the process may be adapted depending on the operational context, institutional arrangements and funding mechanisms.

Step 1: Define your team

If you have not already defined your team, please seechapter 3, step 3: Put together and onboard a team for FbF development If your team is not yet cross-departmental, you may need to engage your National Society's experts in WASH, shelter, livelihoods, and other sectors relevant to the early actions you consider.

In addition to your core team, the steps below require consultation with as wide a range of actors as possible, including community residents, community committees, civil society organizations, local and national governments and agencies, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society branches, other humanitarian and development organizations, research institutions (including the climate science community), and the private sector. The exact composition of actors involved may vary depending on the anticipatory action approach pursued (e.g. community-based initiatives, imminent DREF activations, support to governments in their anticipatory action work, or s/EAP development).

Step 2: Develop a data collection plan to do the following

Although the steps below are presented sequentially, you will save time and resources by selecting your methods and developing a data collection plan and tools that gather information on all four simultaneously (identifying impacts, prioritizing impacts, identifying and brainstorming early actions, narrowing early actions) or iteratively. Each step below lists and links to methods from chapter 5 that will help you to identify hazard impacts, to understand how different stakeholders experience and perceive the severity of these impacts, and to elicit potential early actions.

Use the methods in chapter 5 and steps 3 to 7 below to define a plan for collecting relevant data and testing your results. If you are developing an s/EAP, make sure that you document the process of selecting the early actions: who was consulted and how and what other assessments were considered? Documenting this process is also useful for other anticipatory action approaches to ensure transparency and facilitate future learning. See the toolbox of this chapter or the toolbox of chapter 5 for examples of research plans and templates.



Practical guidance: Sampling a range of communities

When developing an s/EAP, communities are not pre-defined. National Societies decide which communities will receive assistance at the time of activation based on risk and forecast data. Despite this national-level, flexible

approach it is important to gather community-level data to ensure that the impacts being addressed, the risk factors, and the support provided are relevant across the area of potential intervention. As you will not be able to consult all exposed or vulnerable communities in your country, you should develop a plan to strategically collect data from the broadest range of communities possible given the resources available. This means paying attention to factors such as geographic location and exposure, the type of housing, differences in agricultural or other livelihood patterns, road access, and other factors relevant to the early actions you are planning.

You may not be able to gather all types of data from each community, but by using different tools or data sources (e.g. focus group discussions, key informant interviews, community visits) in different locations, you will be able to better compare across contexts and assure the relevance of your early actions across potential intervention areas. For community-based anticipatory action approaches, this process may instead focus on gathering detailed information within specific communities or programme areas where early actions will be implemented.

Step 3: Identify impacts

As the goal of early actions is to prevent or reduce the humanitarian impact of anticipated extreme events, it is of crucial importance to understand the impact that the hazard in question causes, how these impacts unfold and who is most affected. If you have not already done so through a scoping study, you should develop a comprehensive list of impacts for the hazard in question. This can be done using a combination of the following methods outlined in chapter 5 of this manual:

- Impact and risk databases
- Literature review
- Key informant interviews
- Focus groups discussions
- (Post-disaster) community visits
- (Participatory) stakeholder workshops.

These methods can be applied across different anticipatory action approaches. For example, community-based initiatives may place stronger emphasis on participatory consultations with communities, while government-supported anticipatory action systems may also draw on national risk assessments or sectoral studies.

Step 4: Prioritize impacts

Once you have developed a comprehensive list of impacts, you must decide which you can and should focus on. The choice of how to prioritize will depend upon your context and needs. While anticipatory action can contribute to mitigating some disaster risks that have not been otherwise reduced or managed via long-term disaster risk reduction, it cannot address all potential disaster impacts. Prioritizing impacts is therefore essential in order to focus available capacities and resources on those impacts where acting early can make a meaningful difference.

To develop realistic and effective anticipatory action initiatives, particularly when developing an s/EAP, you will need to prioritize the impacts and select your area of focus. This is an important step, as the selection of impacts will influence the early actions that you design to reduce those impacts as well as the indicators or decision-making rules used to determine when early action should be taken. For example, if your selected impact is destruction of houses due to strong winds you will need to design early actions that prevent or reduce such destruction. In the case of an s/EAP, windspeed might therefore become an important variable for your trigger mechanism.

If you are developing an s/EAP, you should be able to clearly state the impacts that you are going to address and explain why. For example, you may prioritize an impact based upon suffering caused to vulnerable populations, overall economic impact, stakeholder priorities (disaster management priorities, National Society priorities, community priorities, etc.), organizational capacity and expertise, and/or after considering the selection criteria for early actions presented in Step 6.1 below. As each of these methods yields opportunities, trade-offs, and challenges, a combination is likely most appropriate. The following previously explained methods can support your team's impact prioritization:

- Impact and risk databases
- Literature review
- Semi-structured, key informant interviews
- Focus group discussions
- (Post disaster) Community visits
- (Participatory) Stakeholder workshops
- Surveys

Step 5: Review and scope existing early actions

Before developing a long list of potential early actions, it is useful to review what types of early actions are already being implemented in your country or in comparable contexts to address the impacts you have prioritized in the previous step. In many countries today, anticipatory action initiatives already exist or have been piloted by governments, Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies, UN agencies, NGOs, or other communities themselves. In some contexts, governments or technical working groups have even defined or are working on standard catalogues of tested early actions as a "menu" to choose from. Reviewing these experiences and practices can help you understand what has worked well, what challenges have emerged, and how your National Society's actions could meaningfully complement existing efforts.

This review does not need to be extensive, but it can provide valuable insights into:

- Early actions that have already been tested
- Operational challenges encountered during implementation
- Opportunities to align with or complement existing initiatives.

Sources for such a review may include discussions with government disaster management authorities, consultations with other humanitarian organizations and UN agencies, scoping existing anticipatory action plans, documentation from previous activations or pilot projects, or resources such as the Anticipation Hub. Insights from this review can inform the brainstorming of early actions described in the next step.

Step 6: Identify and brainstorm potential early actions

As you begin to understand and prioritize the impacts of most concern and relevance to communities and your National Society as well as which actions are already being or have been implemented, you can dig deeper into early actions that might reduce those specific impacts. Be sure to involve experts from relevant sectors, such as shelter, agriculture, WASH, health, or disaster management. The following methods can be used to identify or brainstorm potential early actions:

- Literature review
- Semi-structured, key informant interviews
- Focus group discussions
- (Post disaster) Community visits
- (Participatory) Stakeholder workshops
- Policy and practice reviews
- Early action database
- Community (or stakeholder) ranking activities

The way early actions are identified may differ slightly depending on the anticipatory action approach. For example, community-based anticipatory action may rely strongly on participatory consultations or ranking exercises and local knowledge, while government-supported anticipatory action may build on national standard operating procedures that are developed and agreed on within Technical Working Groups or other coordination mechanisms.



Practical guidance: Brainstorming early actions

In our experience, when brainstorming early actions, stakeholders tend to default to traditional response actions, as that is what they are most familiar with. During workshops, focus group discussions, interviews or other consultations, push participants to think outside the box. This could include proposing new actions or shifting the content and timing of existing actions to make them suitable for anticipatory action.

Try asking: Are there things you do not currently do, but that you could do (between the forecast and hazard onset/peak) to mitigate impacts if you had additional resources or support? Are there actions that are currently implemented only after a disaster but that could instead be implemented earlier to reduce impacts? Is this action more effective as an early action or as a response?

Mozambique: Government-led coordination on anticipatory action

In Mozambique, all anticipatory action initiatives are formally coordinated by the National Institute for Disaster Management (INGD). INGD chairs a Technical Working Group where different partners, including the Mozambique Red Cross (CVM), work on national-level Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for different hazards. As of early 2026, such SOPs were in place for floods, droughts and tropical cyclones.

These national-level SOPs include harmonized trigger thresholds and transparent decision-making rules as to when the government will formally declare an activation and partner organizations initiate implementation of early actions as spelled out in their respective frameworks and protocols. Building on these existing SOPs and the actions included in different protocols, INGD are working towards a standardized catalogue of early actions for each hazard. This ensures that early actions implemented in Mozambique are aligned, coordinated, and tested. It also avoids creating conflicting expectations among at-risk communities across different activations, contexts or implementing partners.

Additional partners starting to work on anticipatory action in Mozambique might therefore not determine “new” early actions on their own but rather implement actions from the SOP catalogue in accordance with their respective mandate and expertise.

Practical guidance: Connecting early warning messaging to Public Awareness and Public Education (PAPE) through the Prepare Messages platform

Early actions identified by National Societies often include the distribution of early warning messaging to help inform communities on actions to take to help keep them safe in hazard scenarios.

When developing these messages, reference thePAPE guide (Public Awareness and Public Education for Disaster Risk Reduction) for guidance on adapting and adopting messages at the national level. A link to the guide can be found in the toolbox.

The IFRC’s Prepare Messages platform (link in thetoolbox) is a database tool for National Societies to publish their early warning messaging. Published messages can be distributed via multiple channels, including through Google SOS Alert, local media, and IFRC digital platforms. Connect with the Global Disaster Preparedness Center for support on developing messages and distributing messages on the Prepare Messages platform.

Step 7: Narrow and prioritize list of early action

Once you have used the methods outlined above 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 IFRC 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.

Step 8: Develop theories of change

Once you have identified several promising early actions, it is time to operationalize them and test the logic behind those ideas using theories of change. A theory of change (ToC) is a comprehensive illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It means describing step-by-step how and why the desired outcome (in our case reduced humanitarian impact) will be attained by implementing the selected early actions. It will help you to visualize, and eventually test whether your early actions are likely to reduce the prioritized impact. Your ToC should also encompass prepositioning and readiness activities that make the early actions possible upon activation. Depending on the anticipatory action approach, this may include readiness measures such as training volunteers, establish or support coordination mechanisms with government actors, or sustain community-based implementation structures. See chapter 4 for more on readiness and prepositioning,

A ToC is often created as a series of "if… then…" statements and then put into a visual representation, like a flowchart (see example below). It helps to think of a ToC as a map on which you mark the spot where you want to go: the desired result or problem solution. Then you draw a route on the map that you think is best to get you from A to B. This is a description of the expected chain of results, from action to solution. Along this route, you will make assumptions. For example, you may have to assume that a particular bridge is passable or that you can cover a certain distance per day. You also note down landmarks you expect to see on your way (intermediate results or milestones). It is important to use all available evidence when building a theory of change, so that every "if… then…" relationship is built on information and evidence rather than conjecture.

A ToC can also be used as a basis for a log frame and monitoring and evaluation framework. When developing an s/EAP, your team should therefore develop a detailed ToC for each early action being considered for inclusion in the protocol. For other anticipatory action approaches, theories of change can similarly help clarify the logic of early actions and support planning, monitoring, and learning. The choice of how many ToCs to develop at this stage will depend upon your team's needs and your process for narrowing and testing your early actions. At the end of this process, your team should have a sound understanding of how and why each action will contribute to your desired results. ToCs for each early action you include in your protocol need to be included in the EAP submitted to the IFRC-DREF.

The ToC process is a crucial step in your identification of actions, make sure to follow this guidance on steps to take.

At least four steps are involved in developing a theory of change:

Step 1

- Start from a specific goal, meaning the positive change the anticipatory action initiative seeks to induce to address a problem that has been identified.

Example: "Reduce the incidence of diarrheal diseases in vulnerable communities when there is flooding in Exemplandia".

Step 2

- Map out the process of change, working backwards from the specific goal. Ask: "What is required to bring about this change?" It is useful to do this as a team and consulting relevant and knowledgeable stakeholders.

Tip: Note down process steps on post-it notes and put them on a flip chart (see example below). Visualizing a ToC helps team members to understand it more easily and question its logic.
Example: Visual representation of a ToC for Exemplandia (see below).

Step 3

- Write a narrative summary expressed as a sequence of logically linked events ("if… then…" statements) and support them with available evidence.

Example 1: "If all households in flood-affected communities have 30-days' worth of water purification tablets and receive information how to use them, then they will purify their drinking water. If they purify all their drinking water, the incidence of diarrheal diseases will decrease."
Example 2: "The ability to deliver water purification tablets is dependent on the assumption that the national society has procured and pre-positioned the necessary supplies and has them ready to be moved and distributed to the population immediately upon activation."

Step 4

- Make implicit assumptions about how changes happen explicit and reference supporting evidence.

Tip: Note assumptions on post-it notes in a different color and add them in between the process steps.

Example : "The ability to deliver water purification tablets is dependent on the assumption that the National Society has procured and pre-positioned the necessary supplies and has them ready to be moved and distributed to the population immediately upon activation."

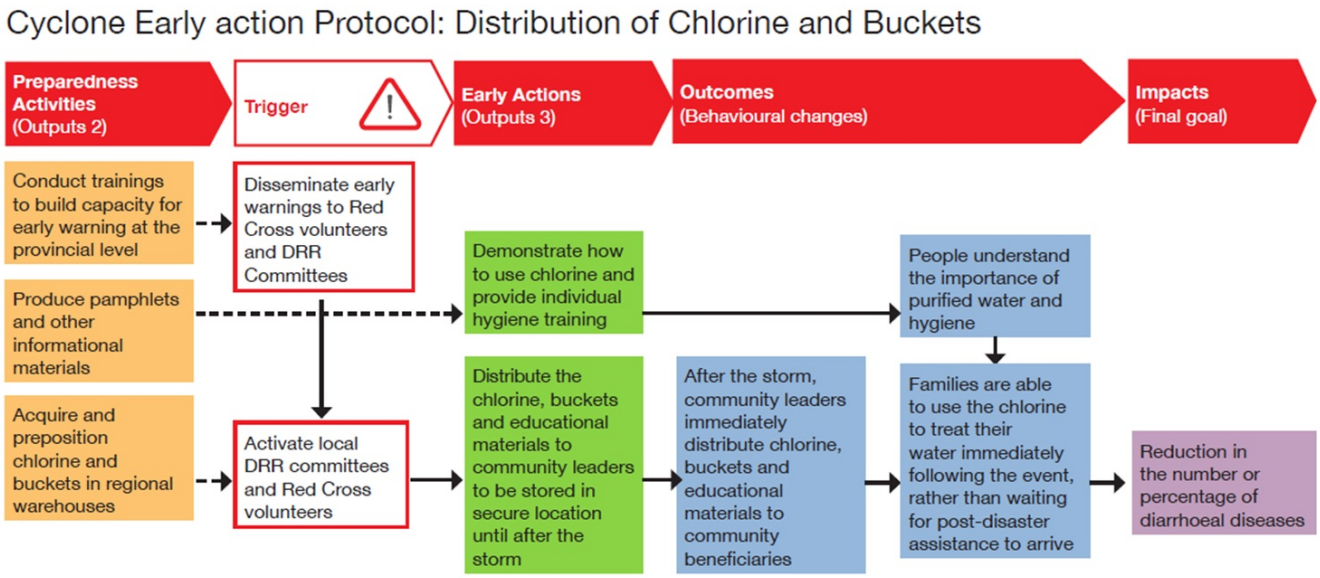
In the previous example, many assumptions are made that would need to be confirmed by evidence. For example, it is assumed that households understand and appreciate the information they have received about the importance of water purification or that they already have the knowledge and awareness to use purification tablets. But what if pre-existing knowledge about water purification is low?

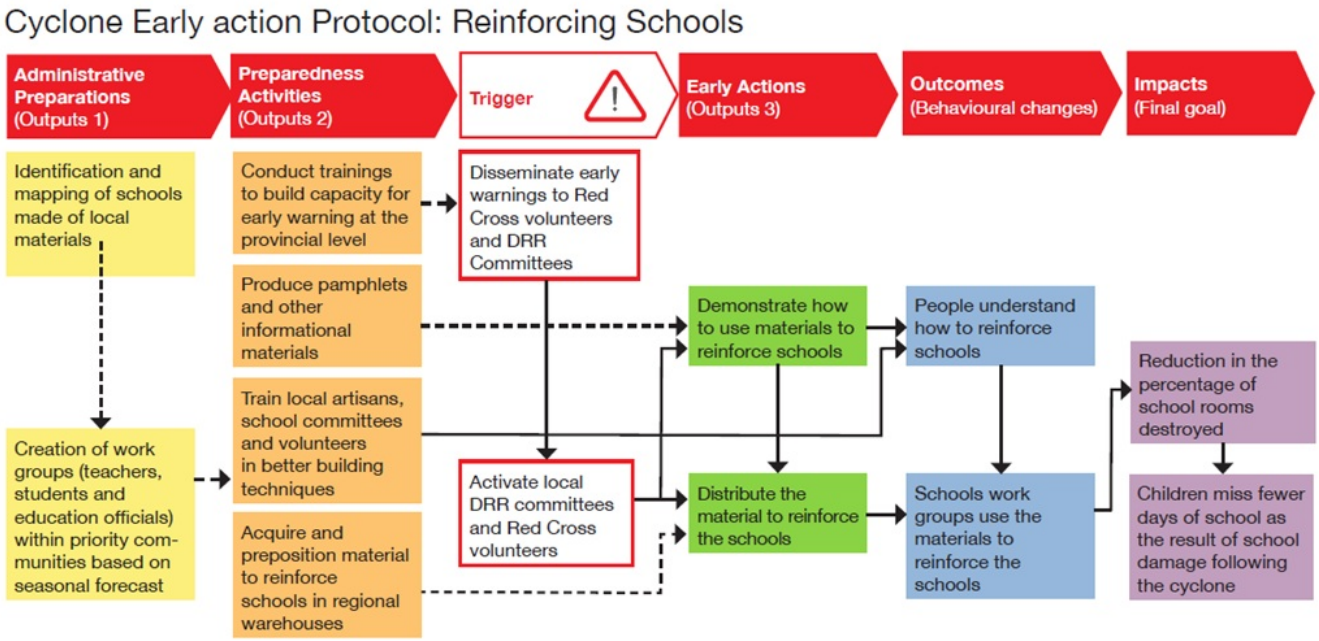
What if written information materials are given to a household whose members cannot read? What if there are community members who speak a different language? What if there are reservations against using blue pills or tablets based on previous bad experiences or rumors? What if households purify their drinking water but they do not purify the water used for washing food items? What if safe hygiene practices are relatively unknown and household members do not wash their hands with soap and water before preparing

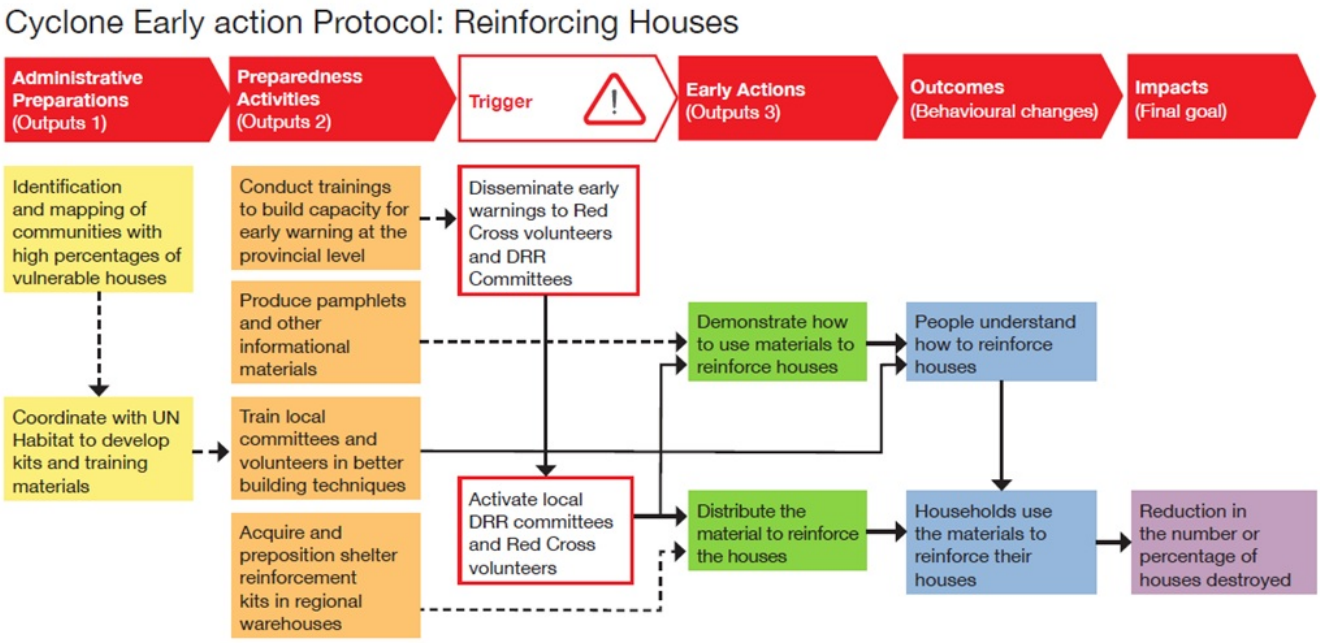
food and before eating?

All assumptions, as trivial as they may seem, should be made explicit and checked against evidence to see whether they are reasonable or need to be addressed as part of the early action protocol or anticipatory action initiative.

For more detailed guidance on how to develop a ToC, see the ToC presentation in the toolbox.







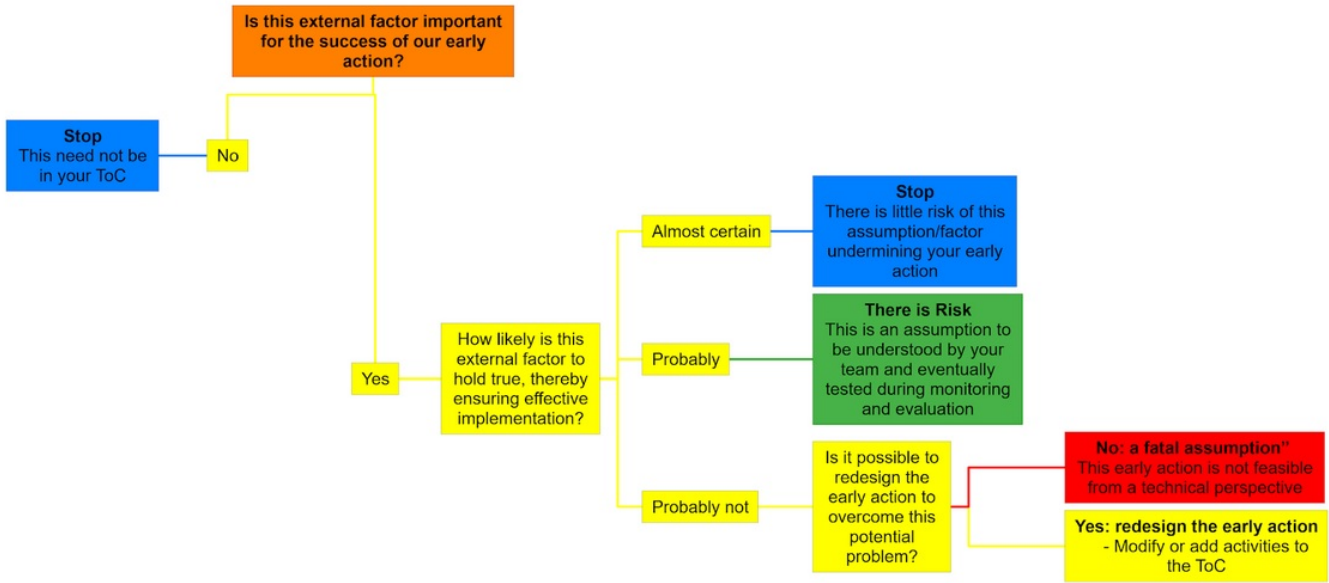
Step 9: Test or workshop - Theory of change

Once your internal team has developed theories of change, it can be useful to test or validate these theories of change with external stakeholders. Perhaps the most important step of this process is making your assumptions explicit and making sure there are not any fatal assumptions to undermine your success. This can be done using the following methods described above:

- Interviews with sector-specific experts
- Stakeholder workshops
- Community consultations

Depending on the anticipatory action approach, relevant external stakeholders may also include local authorities, government technical agencies, or community-based organizations involved in implementation.

Fatal Assumptions Decision-tree



Step 10: Finalize early actions

Based on the external feedback you receive from the consultations in step 8, select the early actions to be included in your anticipatory action initiative and finalize the ToCs. If you are developing an s/EAP, this means selecting the early actions to be included in the protocol. Likewise, in other approaches, it may mean agreeing on the early actions to be integrated into community-based plans, imminent DREF planning options, or government SOPs.

Step 11: Develop an activation plan for selected actions and test it

Design how, by whom and when the selected early actions will be implemented after a trigger has been reached or once the agreed decision-making threshold or activation process has been met. Conduct a tabletop exercise, drill, or full simulation (see chapter 11) to ensure your actions are feasible in the time frame given by the forecast or early warning window. For community-based approaches, this may also involve testing roles and responsibilities at branch or community level. For government-supported anticipatory action, it may include clarifying how National Society actions and implementation processes align operationally with government SOPs or coordination structures.

Step 12: Make rationale explicit your anticipatory action plan

Once you have made the final selection of early actions to be included in your s/EAP, including developing and validating your theories of change, it is essential to document how and why you came to the selection you did. Section 5.2 of the EAP requires that you outline which methodologies and data sources you used to identify impacts and actions and to justify how you came to select the actions in your EAP (note that a Theory of Change is not required in an sEAP). This will allow the Validation Committee to understand why the early actions in your protocol are most likely to mitigate the impacts of the hazard in question on the target population. Being explicit about your rationale will also help those responsible for revisions of the EAP to understand why these actions were selected, to consider what may have changed since those actions were selected, and to decide if the rationale is still valid for future versions of the EAP. Even when working outside the s/EAP mechanism, documenting the rationale for selected early actions is good practice. It can support transparency, coordination with partners, future revisions, and learning across activation or anticipatory action pilots.

Final lessons and recommendations

The methods and processes described above can assist you in identifying and selecting early actions. Keep the following suggestions in mind as you apply them to your context.

The identification and selection of early actions is an iterative process

- As indicated above, exploration of early actions is not a linear process. As you narrow in on the most promising actions, new questions may arise. Follow the gaps in your knowledge until you are confident in the actions you are selecting.

Keep an open mind

- The people within your organization may be attached to actions they are familiar with in a response context. Be sure to talk to as many experts and external stakeholders as possible to widen the possibilities. This may also include government counterparts, community organizations, and technical partners depending on the anticipatory action approach you are pursuing.

Do not pick something just because you have to

- It may be that after completing this process there are few, if any, actions that can be properly executed. In such cases, it may be necessary to discuss a way forward with the project sponsors/donors or look for simple actions (such as reinforcing early warning) that can have an impact.

Be critical – develop theories of change and test them where possible

- Developing a clear theory of change will help you to really assess how your action will contribute to reducing the prioritized impact and whether it can truly be successfully executed given the lead- time available to you. Stakeholders may be overly optimistic (or pessimistic) about the feasibility or effectiveness of a proposed action. Simulations or small-scale pilots are

valuable ways of testing your theory of change and operational capacity and will strengthen the quality of your anticipatory action initiative, especially when developing an s/EAP.

One criterion is not enough

- As you can see from the process above, there are many factors to consider when selecting early actions. An action that has proven extremely effective in one place, for example, might be impossible in another because of political, logistical, or other constraints. You must therefore gather evidence for each of these criteria rather than being guided by a single one.

Look to existing early actions for inspiration

- There are a growing number of countries and partners implementing anticipatory action for a range of hazards. Look to other National Societies or anticipatory action initiatives for guidance based on existing good practices.

Build your own evidence

- Anticipatory action is still an evolving field. This means that you may identify an action that has not been tested in your context. If your innovative action has the potential to help people and there is sufficient support from the partners involved, it may be worthwhile to test the action and develop your own evidence. This evidence can eventually be shared with the broader anticipatory action community, contributing to the Early Action Database and helping others in the process of identifying and assessing early actions.

Involve experts

- Although community involvement is crucial in the selection of the actions, it is important to include sectoral experts in the brainstorming process to identify the best measures to reduce the prioritized impacts, as some solutions might be innovative that communities at risk might not yet be aware of.

Make sure early actions apply the principle of *Do No Harm*.

Toolbox

Early action selection

- Resources for early action selection in FCV settings (Module 5) in the Anticipatory Action in Fragile, Conflict-affected and Violent Settings toolkit
- Guidance on Public Awareness and Public Education for Disaster Risk Reduction
- Prepare Messages Platform

Theory of change

- Theory of change (English)
- Theory of change (Spanish)
- Decision Tree Fatal Assumptions
- Theory of change vs. logic models

DFID review of the use of ‘theory of change’

Learning for Sustainability

Data collection and post-activation guidance

TEMPLATE Data collection methodology planning

Mozambique Guidance and Tools for Post-activation Evaluation of the Cyclone Protocol

Financiamento baseado em Previsão em Moçambique

Other key reads, documents and websites

Cash and Voucher Assistance in Bangladesh (Gros et al.)

Anticipatory action in the age of Covid-19: lessons from Cyclone Amphan in Bangladesh