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Scaling up anticipatory action is a strategic investment: saving lives and livelihoods today while reducing humanitarian needs over time.

Ahead of the 2023–2024 El Niño-induced hazards, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) implemented anticipatory actions in 24 countries,¹ reaching 1.7 million people with timely and preventive support. The interventions focused on drought, flood and cyclone risks, targeting vulnerable rural communities in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific with interventions such as cash-based transfers, agricultural input distributions, water conservation technologies, animal health campaigns and training, among others. These interventions were guided by **FAO's El Niño Anticipatory Action and Response Plan** (launched in August 2023 and updated in October 2023), to ensure immediate support to the most at-risk countries based on analysis of historical trends, seasonal forecasts, agricultural seasonality and vulnerability of populations at risk.

The timeliness and success of FAO's anticipatory actions during this El Niño event are largely due to the extensive groundwork conducted by FAO since 2016 to enhance anticipation and preparedness capacities within its country offices and among key partners. The establishment of a dedicated Anticipatory Action window within FAO's Special Fund for Emergency and Resilience Activities in 2016 has been pivotal to achieve this.

¹ Bangladesh, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Cambodia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Fiji, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Somalia, Timor-Leste, Uganda, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Viet Nam and Zimbabwe.



Furthermore, since the last large-scale El Niño event in 2015–2016 which generated enormous humanitarian needs worldwide, coordination among agencies and with government stakeholders on anticipatory action has improved significantly. The endorsement of FAO and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs led to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's **Standard Operating Procedures: Early Action to El Niño/La Niña Episodes (March 2018)** to facilitate anticipatory actions ahead of related hazards, along with the approval of anticipatory action plans and protocols at the national level in several countries, resulting in a more harmonious approach to anticipatory actions, especially for country-level work.

Evidence of the impact of FAO's El Niño-related anticipatory actions

FAO's anticipatory action has demonstrated a positive impact on the capacity of rural communities to keep producing food and maintaining their productive assets in the face of different types of hazards. The anticipatory action interventions enabled farmers and herders to keep producing food locally, leading to more frequent and more diverse food consumption within the households, despite the hazards. In addition, the provision of assistance ahead of forecast drought and floods proved effective in reducing the need for households to resort to negative coping mechanisms, both in terms of food consumption (e.g. skipping meals, reducing the size of meals, borrowing food) and in terms of livelihoods (e.g. selling productive assets) which is the usual trajectory when communities are faced with shocks. The combination of safeguarding crops and livestock, adopting innovative agricultural practices, and investing in agricultural equipment eventually ensured the communities were able to withstand the shocks without major food security impacts, and this has strengthened the community's ability to withstand future shocks as well.

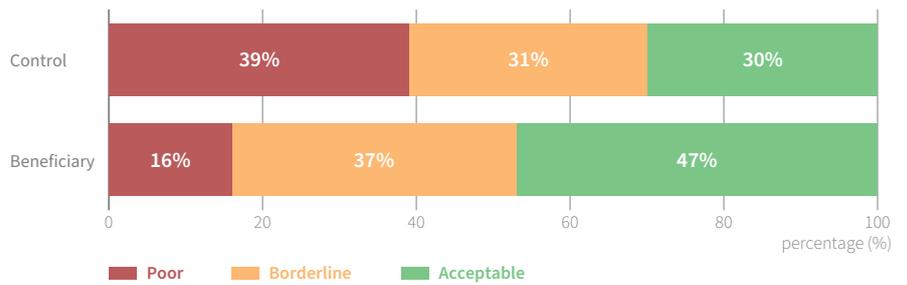
Impact analyses were conducted using a mixed method approach, i.e. triangulating results from quantitative and qualitative data, and ensuring the perspectives of affected people were fully reflected through participatory focus group discussions and interviews. Throughout the 2023–2024 El Niño event, FAO captured evidence on a range of indicators to measure the impact of these interventions. The examples on the next page present preliminary findings of the data gathered.

FOOD SECURITY

Food consumption score (FCS)²

In Madagascar, households receiving cash transfers and drought-tolerant seeds ahead of El Niño-induced drought showed higher rates of acceptable FCS (47 percent) compared to households who did not benefit from the intervention (30 percent).³

Figure 1. Comparison of food consumption scores in Madagascar following El Niño-related anticipatory action interventions



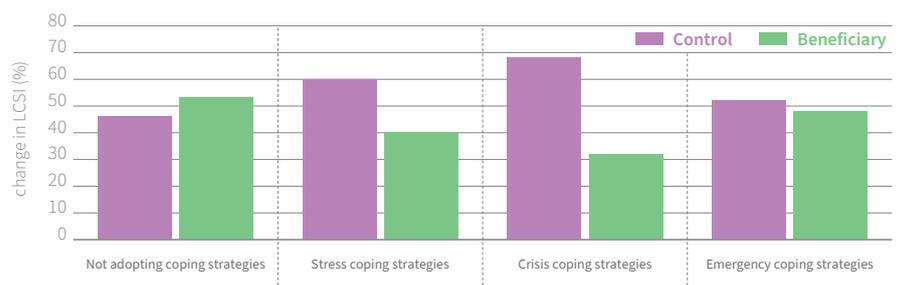
Source: FAO. 2025. *El Niño 2023–2024: Impact analysis of FAO’s anticipatory action interventions*. Internal document.

In the context of a changing climate, rising food insecurity and tightening humanitarian budgets, anticipatory action provides an opportunity to be cost-effective and reaching more people with less resources.

Livelihood coping strategy index (LCSI)⁴

In Mozambique, households that received agricultural inputs, water conservation equipment and training ahead of drought showed a lower use of negative coping mechanisms, compared to households who were not part of the intervention. These households were significantly more dependent on ‘stress’ and ‘crisis’ coping mechanisms.

Figure 2. Comparison of livelihood coping strategy indices in Mozambique following El Niño-related anticipatory action interventions



Source: FAO. 2025. *El Niño 2023–2024: Impact analysis of FAO’s anticipatory action interventions*. Internal document.

² The FCS is one of the main food security indicators, scoring households’ dietary diversity, food consumption frequency and relative nutritional value of different food groups.

³ The data was not gathered in a controlled experiment, in which assistance was given to some households and withheld from other households for the purposes of the impact studies.

⁴ The LCSI is a proxy measure of food insecurity and involves a series of questions on how households cope with shortfalls in access to food. Stress-level mechanisms include borrowing money and spending savings. Crisis mechanisms include selling of productive assets. Emergency mechanisms include selling land or livestock.

► FOOD PRODUCTION

Crop yield

In Honduras, recipients of FAO's anticipatory action intervention – a combination of cash transfers, distribution of agricultural inputs (e.g. seeds and fertilizer), installation of water conservation equipment and training on climate-smart agriculture – resulted in 40-percent higher maize yields compared to households who had not benefited from anticipatory actions. This highlights the effectiveness of anticipatory support in mitigating drought-induced yield losses.

Animal mortality

In Colombia, FAO's anticipatory action intervention supported local communities with distribution of fodder, water conservation equipment and training on animal health, in advance of the El Niño-induced decreased rainfall and water scarcity. Recipients of the anticipatory action support showed no drought-induced mortality among goats, compared to 20 percent mortality rate of goats among communities who did not receive assistance.

Milk production

In Madagascar, FAO's support to vulnerable communities through training on livestock health and management resulted in an increased production of milk. On average, households who benefited from the anticipatory action intervention were able to produce an additional 17 litres of milk (per day/ per cow) compared to households who did not receive assistance. Anticipatory actions helped to preserve livestock productivity, in the face of drought.





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Refihavy, father of 12, from drought-affected Antsakomiary Fokontany, southern Madagascar, received six chickens, climate-smart livestock training and cash assistance to buy seeds. Within months, he was able to increase the number of his chickens to 66, helping him feed his family and generate income that he could use to reinvest in his land. The timely support enabled Refihavy to withstand the impacts of El Niño and start building a more stable and food-secure future.

► RESILIENCE

Perception of preparedness

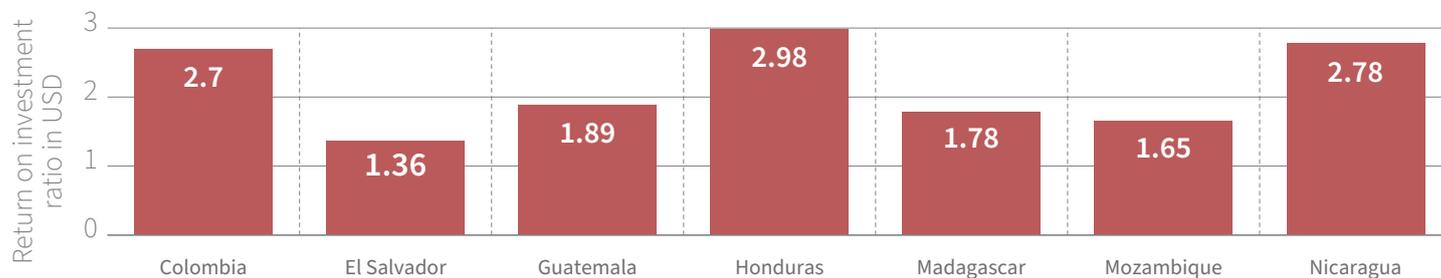
In Mozambique, following FAO's anticipatory action interventions ahead of drought, households were asked the question: "If another major drought occurred tomorrow, could your household recover fully within six months?". Over 40 percent of the recipients of anticipatory action support responded positively to this question, compared to only 20 percent of the households who did not receive support.

► RETURN ON INVESTMENT

FAO has conducted return on investment calculations based on household surveys conducted among communities who benefited from anticipatory actions ahead of El Niño-induced hazards. The return on investment provides a summary of the value for money of acting before the occurrence of a forecast hazard. The avoided losses and added benefits resulting from the anticipatory action support (such as decreased animal mortality, maintained animal body conditions, increased milk production and increased crop production), are compared to the costs of the anticipatory action intervention.

For FAO's 2023–2024 El Niño activations, the return on investment goes up to USD 3, with every USD 1 invested in anticipatory actions yielding up to three times in avoided losses and added benefits.

Figure 3. Return on investment figures for countries that benefited from El Niño-related anticipatory action activations



Source: FAO. 2025. *El Niño 2023–2024: Impact analysis of FAO's anticipatory action interventions*. Internal document.

In the context of a changing climate, rising food insecurity and tightening humanitarian budgets, anticipatory action provides an opportunity to be cost-effective and reaching more people with less resources. By acting early, anticipatory action avoids the high costs of humanitarian response interventions, enabling support to be delivered faster, more efficiently and at a lower cost.

The evidence on FAO's El Niño activations shows that food consumption improved, key livelihood assets were protected, agricultural productivity increased, and the resilience of vulnerable communities was enhanced despite significant impacts of climate shocks. This is a critical learning point in view of the current global reductions in humanitarian and development financing. Scaling up anticipatory action is a strategic investment: saving lives and livelihoods today while reducing humanitarian needs over time.

REQUIRED CITATION

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