



Anticipatory humanitarian action: what role for the CERF?

Moving from rapid response to early action

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Key messages

- Funding early action is consistent with the mandate of the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).
- These early actions would be similar to the kinds of response actions the CERF already supports.
- There is appetite within the UN system to act in advance of crises, using forecast information. While the CERF is not the right instrument to fund all anticipatory actions over different timescales, it may be appropriate in the later stages, when impacts are imminent.
- For rapid-onset events, CERF funds may be best used to mobilise a rapid response – one that can start before large-scale emergency aid arrives. For slow-onset events, CERF funds can be triggered earlier to reduce impacts on livelihoods.
- Early action plans require clear triggers, validated nationally, to reduce uncertainty and remove bureaucratic barriers to action.



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Acronyms

APA	Advanced Preparedness Actions
ARC	Africa Risk Capacity
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CFE	Contingency Fund for Emergencies
DREF	Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (IFRC)
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM)
EAP	Early Action Plan
ERP	Emergency Response Preparedness
EWARN	Early Warning and Response Network
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation (United Nations)
FBA	Forecast-based early action
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
MPA	Minimum Preparedness Actions
NFI	Non-food item
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PPRE	Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies
RC/HC	UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

The humanitarian system is riven with structural challenges that prevent action being taken in advance of anticipated emergencies. The system is typically set in motion when humanitarian needs can be quantified, rather than when alerts are raised. Although timeliness is a key criterion of humanitarian effectiveness, evaluations rarely lay out timelines between when leading indicators or forecasts began signalling a deteriorating situation and when humanitarian support reached the people affected. Bureaucratic hurdles to the release of funds are common, and political decision-makers are rewarded for responding to crises, rather than for averting their impacts.

Forecast-based early action (FbA) initiatives are intended to shift the incentives for humanitarians to act in advance of crises, using pre-committed finance. Forecasting technologies have improved rapidly in the last decade, and various initiatives from UN agencies, NGOs and governments have begun to capitalise on this data to anticipate crises. Although the scope and type of initiatives vary, FbA projects are designed to mitigate the impact of a crisis on vulnerable people and their livelihoods and improve the effectiveness of emergency preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

This study investigates the type of programmatic activities that could be suitable for Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) funding if it were to open applications for early action in anticipation of humanitarian crises. The study considers both the actions that are relevant under the CERF's life-saving criteria, as well as the kinds of actions humanitarian agencies would like to take in advance of a crisis, but are currently unable to fund through the CERF. As it stands, the CERF's current life-saving criteria offer significant scope for including well-planned and well-sequenced early action. Early action differs more in timing than in content from traditional humanitarian support.

Still, there is some unease about whether CERF funding could be used in an anticipatory

way without falling into the amorphous category of 'preparedness'. Interviewees for this study, except those that work on FbA projects, flattened distinctions between preparedness, early action and rapid response. Yet monitoring and analysing risks, developing contingency plans, training key stakeholders and conducting disaster scenario exercises are all general preparedness actions; they do not fall under the remit of humanitarian action in emergencies, despite being indispensable to effective early action and response. By pre-committing finance and establishing triggers for action when certain risk thresholds are reached, the CERF can incentivise development and humanitarian actors to undertake new kinds of preparedness activities. In turn, these actors can take advantage of significant cost and time savings by acting in advance of emergencies.

Any attempts by the CERF to finance early action must not create additional bureaucratic barriers or parallel planning processes that could lead to arguments over whether an intervention consists of early action or preparedness. What is distinct about early action is the *timing* – early action occurs after an early warning or pre-agreed trigger, but prior to the onset of a full-blown crisis and humanitarian response. This report strongly recommends that the CERF consider financing early action in a phased approach, with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) or Early Action Plans (EAPs) structuring clearly sequenced interventions integrated into existing national contingency planning processes. The CERF is not the right instrument to fund all pre-crisis activities, and preparedness activities that can be taken after a seasonal forecast is issued are not life-saving or urgent enough to warrant humanitarian funding. Instead, the CERF should focus on the later phase(s) of early action, when actors are preparing for an imminent humanitarian response but have an opportunity to mitigate the expected consequences for vulnerable people. This study cannot set clear

boundaries between phases for all crises, as where these thresholds lie depends on the context, the hazard and the data available to assess risks.

Because CERF funding is delivered through the UN system, early action under CERF should avoid replicating existing FbA pilots implemented by UN agencies and partners. These pilots are focused on particular countries or sub-national areas, and on a single sector or hazard. Instead, the CERF should focus on the kinds of interventions that can be coordinated and delivered rapidly and at scale. For rapid-onset events with short lead times, the most appropriate early action may simply be mobilising for a large humanitarian response using forecast data, rather than waiting for needs assessments to begin financing the procurement, pre-positioning and delivery of aid. For slow-onset events, more sophisticated interventions can be designed to support livelihoods and markets. The exact content and timeframes for CERF interventions will depend on the context and what has been

pre-defined in SOPs and contingency plans. If these plans can be costed and validated by the CERF, UN agencies can dedicate their own internal contingency funds to coordinated early actions, with the knowledge that CERF will allow costs to be reimbursed. The key is to ensure the predictability of funding. Similarly, having budgeted plans in place would provide CERF with realistic fundraising targets and a clearer understanding of what kinds of costs (and cost savings) early action will involve.

In the midst of debates about anticipatory action, it is easy to forget that lives are at stake. The CERF choosing to act earlier is not simply an operational shift reflecting the latest fad in humanitarian action, but a change that will have genuine implications for people enduring droughts, fleeing violence and conflict or living in proximity to an outbreak of a deadly and contagious illness. For vulnerable families, receiving support earlier can mean the difference between devastation and resilience.

1 Introduction: concepts and evidence

1.1 Defining early action

‘What is early action? How is it different from preparedness and prevention? Those are the type of questions that we shouldn’t be asking anymore. What is different is timing’ (UN Resident Coordinator, September 2018).

Understanding of early action varies between agencies and individuals. In this study, early action is defined as actions taken in response to a trigger but before an emergency hits, which are intended to mitigate the impact of a crisis or improve the response. This may include prevention, preparedness, social protection or mitigation measures – the key defining feature is the timeframe within which the action is implemented, between a warning or trigger and the occurrence of a foreseen hazard.

The definitions in Box 1 are based on the CERF’s life-saving criteria and an amalgam of definitions presented by agencies undertaking FbA, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Start Fund. However, several experts interviewed for this study argued that nailing down rigid definitions for ‘early action’ can be counterproductive. Early actions are not fixed, but malleable dependent on their intent and timing. Is the action being taken in response to an impending hazard? Is the action intended to mitigate the impacts on vulnerable people? As one respondent from the Start Network explained: ‘We try to encourage our members to be comfortable working in the grey areas. Alerts can combine elements of both anticipation and response’.

Box 1 Definitions related to anticipatory action

Early action. Actions taken in response to a trigger or threshold but before an emergency fully materialises, which are intended to mitigate the impact of the crisis or improve the response.¹

Anticipatory action. This study considers anticipatory action to be a synonym of early action; anticipatory actions are actions taken in anticipation of a crisis, which are intended to mitigate the impact of the crisis or improve the response.

Forecast-based action. This study considers forecast-based action to be a type of early action. Forecast-based actions are actions triggered using climate or other forecasts prior to a shock or before acute impacts are felt, to reduce the impact on vulnerable people and their livelihoods, improve the effectiveness of emergency preparedness, response and recovery efforts and reduce the humanitarian burden. In many initiatives, forecast-based actions are linked to pre-agreed funding, disbursed after a trigger (Wilkinson et al., 2018).

¹ The second component of this definition – improving and ensuring a more rapid response – was not always formally in institutional ‘early action’ definitions, but was repeated by interviewees from the World Health Organization (WHO), IFRC, FAO and others working in an anticipatory capacity in relation to various hazards. Other agencies contacted, including the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), do not have formal definitions of early action.

Box 1 Definitions related to anticipatory action cont'd

Early warning. The provision of timely and effective information, through identified institutions, that allows individuals, responders and decision-makers exposed to a hazard to take action to avoid or reduce risks and prepare for effective response.

Early response. There is often confusion over whether early action refers to action taken ahead of an impending shock to reduce its impact, based on forecasts/predicted needs, or simply a faster, more timely humanitarian response (Oxfam, 2017). For clarity, we use early response to refer to the latter. The types of anticipatory actions that the CERF has undertaken to date are best understood as early response.

Life-saving humanitarian actions. Actions that, within a short timespan, mitigate or avert direct loss of life and physical and psychological harm or threats to a population or major portion thereof and/or protect their dignity (CERF, 2010).

Preparedness. The knowledge and capacities developed by governments, response and recovery organisations, communities and individuals to anticipate, respond to and recover from the impacts of disasters (UNISDR, 2017).² The primary distinction with early action, which takes place in response to a specific and imminent shock or stress, is that preparedness activities are taken for as yet unknown threats that are likely to manifest in future. For example, operating an early warning system and monitoring hazards,

or checking evacuation shelters at the start of the hurricane season, are 'preparedness' actions. Under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)'s Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) process, creating a Minimum Preparedness Action (MPA) plan would be categorised as preparedness.

Advanced humanitarian readiness. Activities and measures taken in advance of a specific hazard risk to ensure operational readiness for a humanitarian response. Activities include sourcing and procuring relief stocks, meeting administrative and staffing needs, assessing infrastructure and sectoral capacities and establishing or invigorating coordination mechanisms.³ Under the IASC's ERP process, implementing an Advanced Preparedness Action (APA) plan would be categorised as advanced humanitarian readiness.

Prevention. Activities to avoid the adverse impacts of hazards and disasters. Prevention activities might include early warning education campaigns, switching to hazard-resistant crop strains or building flood protection.

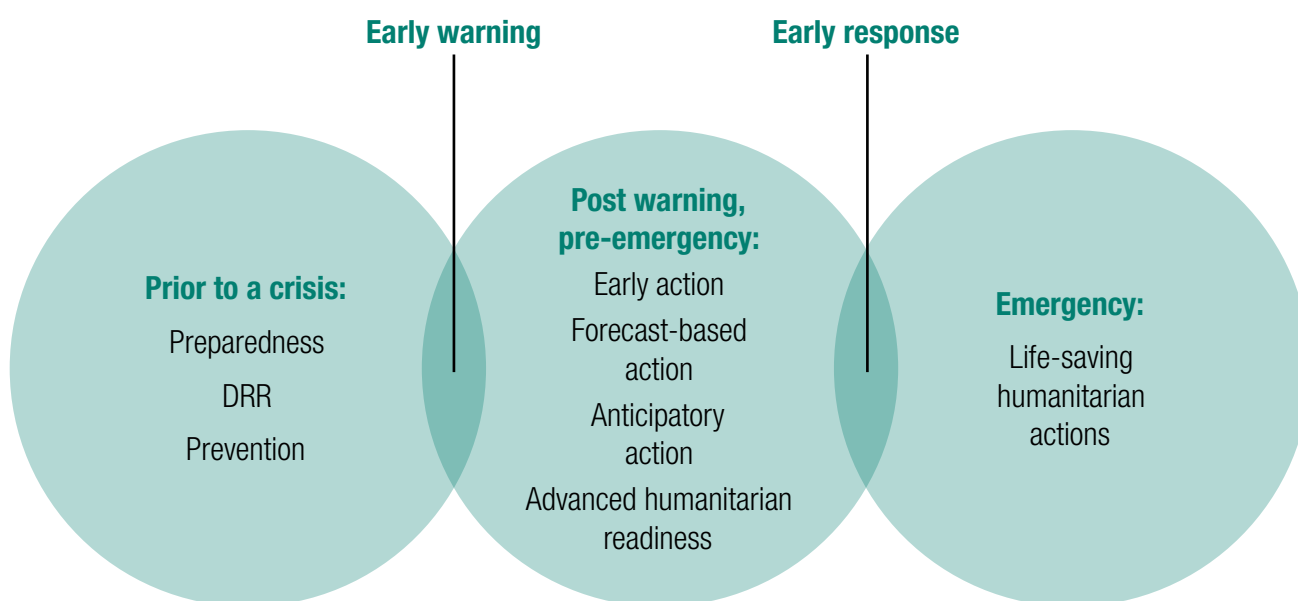
Disaster risk reduction. Measures to minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout a society, to avoid (prevention) or limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards, within the context of sustainable development.⁴ Prevention and preparedness are two components of disaster risk reduction.

2 UNISDR understands preparedness to apply to both imminent and current shocks, but this study takes a different view. In the context of early action, preparedness is general, and done prior to anticipating a specific crisis. Early actions, not 'preparedness' actions, are undertaken in response to an imminent shock or stress.

3 This definition is adapted from the guidance on 'Advanced Preparedness Actions' in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)'s ERP approach. See <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/252246/emergency-response-preparedness-erp-approach-iasc-idp-situations-natural-disasters>.

4 The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction is the major post-2015 agreement for disaster risk reduction, with global targets and four priorities for action: 1. Understanding disaster risk; 2. Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; 3. Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience; 4. Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to 'build back better' in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Figure 1 Untangling concepts: the early action spectrum



Source: The author.

1.2 Can early action save lives?

The humanitarian cost of late response to disasters is self-evident – reams of reports point to the suffering caused when early warnings are ignored or not acted on (see for example Hillier and Dempsey, 2012). Making the case for early action in the humanitarian system, however, remains a work in progress. The economic implications of early action have been explored by a number of studies, pointing to cost savings in acting before an emergency begins (Cabot Venton et al., 2013; Cabot Venton, 2018; UNICEF/WFP, 2015), but there is little evidence of how these reduce human suffering and save lives, compared to ex-post humanitarian response. The timeframes of early action, particularly for rapid-onset events, are not conducive to rapid assessments or robust control studies, and the ethics of humanitarian action forbid purposefully withholding aid in the interests of generating evidence. Future attempts to test early action will therefore need to develop methodologies to investigate these questions and improve the evidence base about what kinds of actions can and should be triggered in

anticipation of an emergency. In any future study, the counterfactual to early action should not be inaction, but a traditional humanitarian response.

The absence of systematic studies does not discount that early actions can be life-saving. Many early actions correspond with standard humanitarian responses – cash transfers, provision of seeds and livestock feed, water and sanitation kits, provision of essential drugs and preparing the systems and materials to trace unaccompanied children (KII UNICEF, October 2018). The IFRC, FAO and WFP’s early action interventions ask potential beneficiaries in advance what support they need, and base decisions on people’s preferences. Because interventions are usually planned months or weeks in advance,¹ early action can provide more scope to support people’s livelihood and coping strategies than humanitarian responses delivered in an emergency.

Early actions have been found to generate cost savings. The first way this can happen is through reduced caseloads, as interventions can mitigate impacts and the resulting humanitarian need will be lower. Strong evidence exists that treating severe acute malnutrition can be up to four times

¹ One exception is the Start Fund’s Anticipatory Window, which does not require an early action plan in advance to activate an intervention.

more expensive than treating moderate acute malnutrition. During the last El Niño episode, FAO Zimbabwe (financed by the CERF) provided animal feed to farmers, preventing animals from dying. The assessment of the CERF's El Niño response argued that farmers in Swaziland might not have lost 80,000 livestock if the government and aid agencies had been more proactive in providing water and feed (Mowjee et al., 2018).

The second mechanism for saving costs is prepositioning aid supplies ahead of time, taking advantage of lower procurement prices and more cost-efficient transport and logistics arrangements (Cabot Venton, 2018). There is evidence that the unit cost of food aid is reduced by a half to a third if procured early, due to lower unit and transport prices (Cabot Venton, 2013). For example, in past responses WFP has operated expensive airlifts from Dubai to support populations affected by drought. The cost savings and reduction in greenhouse gases that could have been achieved if the shipments had been by road from Djibouti would have been significant without compromising timeliness. A study by Cabot Venton (2018) argued that the US government could have saved 30% on humanitarian aid in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia over 15 years if it had undertaken early humanitarian action.

Although actions along the entire continuum from risk reduction to acute humanitarian response are potentially life-saving, this study focuses on the timing of activities in relation to peaks or spikes in humanitarian need. Early action protocols typically include phased approaches, with different windows for action based on the level of risk, the probability that the event will occur and the lead times for action. Humanitarian actions, however, typically take place in the 'early action' and 'early response' phases (see figures in Section 4).

1.3 Methodology

The findings in this paper draw on primary and secondary research, including interviews with UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs) and experts at UN agencies that receive CERF funding. A review of peer-reviewed and grey literature identified the types of early actions with life-saving potential. The review used search terms for key words related to early action, drought, floods, storms, epidemics, conflicts, hazards, life-saving and humanitarian intervention. Because the literature on early action does not generally investigate its life-saving potential (doing x activity prior to an emergency, versus the value of doing y activity after an emergency), focusing instead on assessing the economic benefits or moral imperative of acting earlier, this line of inquiry was dropped, and additional focus was placed on expert interviews.

Thirty-two interviews were conducted between September and October 2018 with a range of stakeholders: RC/HCs working in countries affected by natural hazards, experts working in HQs of UN agencies that receive CERF funding, practitioners working on early action pilots or projects and experts in humanitarian preparedness. The CERF secretariat provided a list and a snowball technique was used to identify additional interviewees.

EAPs or SOPs developed in advance of crises were solicited from practitioners working on early action pilots and projects. These plans, as well as the Start Network's portal of case studies, were reviewed to identify the types and sequence of actions in these pilots, and to compare against the CERF's life-saving criteria. In many cases, plans were only in draft form; early action is an iterative process, and most early action projects mentioned here are relatively recent.

2 How does early action align with the CERF's mandate and experience?

The fact that the CERF is thinking about earlier engagement is positive if it preserves and does not dilute its mandate (OECD interviewee, October 2018).

2.1 Early action and the CERF's mandate

The CERF is dedicated to providing timely and reliable support in response to humanitarian emergencies. By channelling funds through UN agencies, the CERF can quickly disburse large amounts of funding to any emergency in the world (CERF, 2018). Although the CERF sees itself as the first source of finance in a crisis, its mandate provides significant scope to respond in advance of crises. The CERF's grant facility has three primary objectives:

- Promote early action and response to reduce loss of life.
- Enhance response to time-critical requirements.
- Strengthen core elements of humanitarian response in under-funded crises.

The first two objectives correspond to the CERF's rapid response window to address sudden-onset crises. The first objective clearly states that the CERF is designed to promote 'early action', though whether 'early' is relative to early warnings or to the speed of other humanitarian instruments is not clear. The second objective plainly fits within the parameters of early action.

In 2005, the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan defined the intent as acting 'within specific seasons or time frames' to save lives – language that echoes today's early action initiatives, which, for meteorological hazards, assess seasonal weather patterns and their likely impacts:

For a number of important humanitarian actions, timing is critical, and they must be undertaken within specific seasons or time frames in order to protect and save lives effectively. The Fund will be used to ensure that such time-critical actions can be initiated within the period determined to be necessary to save lives and limit costs (UN General Assembly, 2015).

According to interviewees for this study, the CERF's rapid response window was designed to be narrowly focused on reacting to new crises. This interpretation of the CERF's mandate has been slowly changing, however, and an independent review of the CERF's role in the El Niño response in 2015–16 advocated for the CERF to play a larger role in financing actions in response to early warnings (Mowjee et al., 2018). In September 2018, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for increased funding to the CERF to promote early humanitarian action. In October 2018, the CERF Advisory Board discussed moving the CERF towards acting earlier.

The CERF's third objective refers to allocations through its under-funded emergencies window (CERF, 2009). Although this study does not consider how the window might contribute

to early action, interviewees mentioned that it was easier to access finance for early action through this window. Unlike rapid response, allocations did not need to show that a new spike in needs had occurred, making it easier to use funding for early action when a situation was felt to be deteriorating.

In addition to its mandate, existing features make the CERF conducive to early action. CERF permits backdating applications by up to six weeks to cover costs incurred between the start of the response and proposal approval, replenishing stocks used for emergency response and responding before an official declaration of an emergency. All of these features can be more explicitly harnessed for early action initiatives, allowing partners to pre-arrange contracts with suppliers in order to respond to triggers without delaying decisions and processes by waiting for confirmation for funding.

Understanding how the CERF fits among other financing instruments for early action is beyond the scope of this study, but it is a relevant question for future research. Most existing early action initiatives are on a much smaller scale than the allocations that the CERF currently disburses, and funds are usually channelled through a single agency. If the CERF were to make finance available to UN agencies to respond in a coordinated way to forecasts, the CERF would not be replicating the functions of any instrument currently in operation. This would also be in line with the recommendations of Wilkinson et al. (2018), who argue that existing donor mechanisms need to be expanded to support early action, rather than creating parallel funding structures.

2.2 CERF experiences in funding early action

The boundaries between early action and early response can be blurred. Because the CERF is often the first source of international funding for a crisis, it was described by some interviewees as having supported early action in the past.

One such example went as far back as 2006, when CERF finance helped an initial wave of people displaced by violence in Sri Lanka before a much larger spike in humanitarian needs.² A 2014 ODI study found that, in isolated cases, CERF financed a narrow range of ‘preparedness activities’ for health-related crises, such as stockpiling and warehousing, though these decisions were ad hoc and context-dependent (Kellet and Peters, 2014). More recently, early action has been more explicitly included in the types of humanitarian action the CERF funds. In a 2018 briefing, the CERF secretariat highlighted a number of instances where the fund had financed early responses to imminent and worsening crises, including famine and near-famine conditions in Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen and Northern Nigeria in 2017. In March 2018, the CERF secretariat worked with RC/HCs in high-risk countries in the Sahel to respond earlier to severe food insecurity when parts of Mauritania were already deemed to be in ‘crisis’ (Cadre Harmonisé, 2018).

The extent to which the above are really examples of early action in slow-onset crises is hard to ascertain, as the primary metric is still how quickly funding CERF arrives compared to other sources of finance (as opposed to whether it arrives before a crisis or before a peak in emergency needs). One IFRC report suggests that ‘it can be reasonably argued that any humanitarian response to a slow-onset disaster is a late response – at least in those cases where early responses were absent or inadequate’ (IFRC et al., 2014). In the case of severe food insecurity, the crisis manifests slowly and follows a sequence: failures in food production, market failures and failures in humanitarian relief. Even when support arrives to the country in crisis, reaching affected communities can take several weeks, especially if the crisis is in a marginal or inaccessible area with poor infrastructure or insecurity (Devereux et al., 2017).

Still, the metric for whether the CERF has financed early action remains how quickly its funding arrives compared to other humanitarian

2 One RC mentioned that CERF funding allowed relief operations for Sri Lankan IDPs to begin ‘early’ during the civil war. By responding to an initial displacement, humanitarian systems were prepared to scale up to much larger relief operations when the war intensified.

instruments, rather than whether funds have been used to support actions in a time-critical window prior to a crisis. A review of the CERF's humanitarian response to the 2015–16 El Niño found that CERF funding was often the first source of international aid to arrive in a country. Even so, in Mongolia and Vietnam CERF funding arrived after the peak of emergency needs. These delays stemmed from myriad factors, including agencies waiting for governments to declare an emergency before requesting CERF funds, limited knowledge of CERF criteria for accepting funding applications and lengthy needs assessments initiated in the absence of an early warning system (Mowjee et al., 2018).

More recent efforts to encourage early action have involved the CERF secretariat taking an active role in working with RC/HCs to initiate a response. In 2017, the Sahel experienced a poor rainy season from June to September, causing the lean season to begin two months earlier than usual (in March rather than May 2018) (FAO et al., 2018). The CERF's joint planning for an early intervention began in March 2018, six months after the close of the poor rainy season and at the onset of the early lean season. Although this is still a mark of progress, well-planned early action using a phased approach might have started during the poor rainy season in 2017, based on seasonal forecasts. Early action should be delivered to anticipate these spikes in need, rather than be initiated by them.

For other crises, interviewees did not believe that funding early action would have been possible under the CERF's current criteria. In one case, interviewees suggested that CERF funds could have been used to anticipate 2016 drought impacts in the Karnali region of Nepal. The interviewees stated that they had to 'wait for the situation to deteriorate' because they did not believe funding would be available to act in

anticipation. In this case, the RC estimated that the response was costlier as a result of the delay and resulted in a higher incidence of cases of severe acute malnutrition. Another interviewee regretted not being able to act in advance of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 when all forecast models were predicting a category 5 storm days before it made landfall. The CERF responded two days after landfall with a \$25 million allocation, but an earlier trigger would have enabled agencies to preposition or deliver support in advance. Without explicit guidance for early action, the prevailing culture of waiting for evidence of quantifiable impacts still steers humanitarian response.

2.3 Overlaps between CERF life-saving criteria and early action pilots

Some humanitarian agencies make the case that early actions are 'different', not just 'earlier' (IFRC et al., 2014). While this makes sense in the early phases of anticipating a crisis, early actions are phased according to the severity of an impending crisis, and in the later stages many activities *do* resemble traditional humanitarian work. Based on a review of SOPs developed for different early action pilots, the contents of interventions were not dissimilar from the types of actions that the CERF already funds under its life-saving criteria.³

Table 1 compares a range of activities described in early action SOPs with the CERF's life-saving criteria. The list is not exhaustive, but illustrative of the kinds of actions that fall within the remit of early action initiatives, the CERF's life-saving criteria and the overlap between the two. Although the CERF is currently consulting UN agencies on how it might need to revise its criteria, existing criteria already encompass key life-saving actions that could be implemented earlier.

3 These include FAO's EAPs for drought in the Philippines, Madagascar, Kenya and Sudan and its (unpublished) Early Warning Early Action toolkit; the IFRC's SOP for flooding in Bangladesh, dzud impacts in Mongolia, extreme cold weather in Peru and tropical cyclones in the Philippines; WFP's SOP for tropical cyclones in the Philippines; and the Start Network's *Pre-alert guidance notes for conflict and displacement, epidemics, drought, floods, and cyclones* and case studies on anticipating crises in Timor-Leste, Malawi, Kenya and Tajikistan.

Table 1 Comparison of early actions in SOPs with actions permitted under the CERF's life-saving criteria

	Activities in existing EAPs	Overlaps	CERF life-saving criteria
Agriculture and livestock	Early harvesting and adjustments to production cycle	Provision of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and tools to restore food security/production capacity	Emergency embankments, spot repair of agricultural infrastructure and other emergency inputs
	Support off-season cropping with inputs and training	Emergency vaccination, initial re-stocking, de-stocking and water and supplementary feeding for animals	Provision of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and tools to restore food security/production capacity
	Promote local production of fodder	Rehabilitating water points or establishing new/temporary water points	Emergency vaccination, initial re-stocking, de-stocking and water and supplementary feeding for animals
	Seed protection and storage		Rehabilitating water points or establishing new/temporary water points
	Introduce water-harvesting techniques in agriculture		
	Emergency vaccination, initial re-stocking, de-stocking and water and supplementary feeding for animals		
	Rehabilitating water points or establishing new/temporary water points		
Market-based interventions	Food price stabilisation by selling or buying grain on the national market	Cash transfers and voucher programmes	Cash transfers and voucher programmes
	Cash transfers and voucher programmes		
Health and nutrition	Community mobilisation and outreach for epidemic prevention and risk behaviour education	Hygiene and sanitation supplies and awareness-raising	Nutrition screening and surveillance to provide time-critical information to identify areas of urgent need
	Vaccination campaigns		Management of severe and moderate acute malnutrition
	Hygiene and sanitation supplies and awareness-raising		Hygiene and sanitation supplies and awareness-raising
Housing	Reinforce housing and shelters in advance of storms	Provision and distribution of shelter materials	Provision and distribution of shelter materials
	Clear canals, ditches and firebreaks		
	Provision and distribution of shelter materials		

3 Timing early action

Early action is any action taken in response to a trigger or alert before a disaster occurs. There are a range of activities, which don't necessarily change between preparedness or response. The key thing is the timing (UN Resident Coordinator, October 2018).

Using generic case studies, this section examines the impacts of different kinds of hazard that result in humanitarian emergencies, the types of impacts they have on people, and early actions that have been proposed or trialled. This is not meant to be a thorough taxonomy of early action or a definitive guide to how crises unfold, but rather provides indicative windows and potential actions. Early action is not a single set or sequence of interventions, nor does it correspond to a uniform timeframe. In the case of drought, floods, storms and conflict, there is a progression of actions, from broader risk reduction to advanced humanitarian readiness.

While interviewees agreed that there were tangible early actions that could be implemented in advance, there was in many cases a reluctance to be specific, as the concept of early action to crises was still relatively new. One starting point for defining appropriate actions was to consider

the types of humanitarian response required for different events, and what kinds of things could be done to remove the need to deliver a response.

It is worth noting that even early action pilots designed to meet needs earlier still struggle to respond within an appropriate timeframe when it comes to slow-onset events. The FAO's pastoral livelihood project referred to in Section 4.1 provided essential support, but still failed to reach beneficiaries during peak needs. Similarly, a crisis modifier deployed in BRACED resilience projects in the Sahel to support early action arrived much later than project partners anticipated. Early action to slow-onset events should be considered an iterative process, with triggers and indicators refined annually to address this tendency to respond with too little, too late. Among some interviewees, there was a perception that early action may require less precise data (for substantiating funding requests) in order to react according to the agricultural calendar.

This section does not include an example of acute geophysical emergencies, in particular earthquakes, despite the fact that these can have significant humanitarian impacts. Earthquakes generally occur without warning, and did not feature in the types of emergencies that RC/HCs believed could be anticipated.

3.1 Early action for drought

Box 2 An overview of early action for drought

Without anticipatory action, when do impacts appear?

Impacts from drought vary for different geographies and livelihood groups, and based on prior climatic conditions. Droughts are not the linear product of a single poor rainy season, but of successive failed or poor rainy seasons. Still, the failed harvests, livestock mortality and insufficient access to water that result from drought contribute to serious health impacts, including poor nutrient intake and increased disease prevalence.

What are the lead times for these impacts?

Although forecasts vary in their range, and many sources of information for drought are designed to combine predictive forecasts with real-time impacts, interviewees agreed that six months' lead time was a reasonable window to identify that a drought was developing that would result in poor harvests, livestock mortality and water scarcity. A more detailed projection could be considered with a three-month lead time (from the expected peak of needs), which could give sufficient time to get stocks and supplies in place for a response.

What kind of forecast evidence exists?

There are numerous efforts to forecast drought and predict or track food insecurity. The impact of drought is caused by multiple factors beyond precipitation alone, and many drought prediction tools bundle these together, including meteorological information, livelihood practices, market information, political factors and coping strategies.

Climate phenomena

- El Niño/La Niña – the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) of Columbia University produces a monthly El Niño/La Niña forecast indicating the probability of an El Niño event for a given year. The forecast provides the basis for the IASC's ENSO SOPs (see Section 2.1 for more detail).

Climatic impact (GHACOF, SARCOF, national meteorological organisations)

- Rainfall – precipitation forecasts from national meteorological agencies and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOOA).
- Greater Horn of Africa Climate Outlook Forum (GHACOF) – an East African forum where the consensus regional climate outlook is presented to users, who translate the forecast into sectoral impacts and develop mitigation strategies.

Productive impact

- Yield
- Livestock body condition
- Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) – remote sensing data to understand the state of vegetation.

Humanitarian impact

Food insecurity

- Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) and Cadre Harmonisé (the West African equivalent) assess current and projected food insecurity. They score the severity of the food security situation based on a consensus model from in-country committees of experts and government officials.
- FEWS NET is a consolidated dataset related to food insecurity. It projects food security outcomes using IPC-compatible analysis, but without a similarly consensus-driven approach.
- Famine Action Mechanism (FAM) is the World Bank's new mechanism to predict food insecurity and famine. The model will track remote sensing options and other forms of large data to create more accurate predictions. The model is still being developed and tested.

Displacement

- IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).

Sources: Start Network, 2018; Artan, 2017.

Box 2 An overview of early action for drought cont'd

What actions are appropriate for mitigating impacts and saving lives?

- Supplemental feed and veterinary care for livestock.
- Training for farmers using new off-season cropping techniques, new drought-resistant seeds or shifting to high nutrition-value varieties.
- Provision of shorter season seeds to enable replanting after an extended drought spell.
- Rehabilitation of water points and, where appropriate, installing new water systems.
- Preparation of supplies and equipment (protective equipment, vaccinations).
- Mass vaccination (in case of large outbreaks or where there is a high risk of spreading).

We know a drought is coming, but we also know we will not get funding on time. We always deliver too little, too late, and not targeted to the right people (FAO interviewee, September 2018).

You could fill a room with reports and examples of early warning systems that work, and that the response does not happen. We need to fund early warning – but when we fund it and it works, we are crying into a vacuum (UN Resident Coordinator, September 2018).

Much of the research and programming championing early action comes out of frustration with late responses to drought. More so than other hazards, the painfully slow evolution of drought impacts – from failed harvests, livestock mortality, insufficient access to water and poor nutrient intake to the interaction of malnutrition with other diseases – has been documented in retrospective reports asking why early warnings and forecasts were not heeded. In the case of the 2011 Horn of Africa drought, a La Niña Task Force flagged that pre-emptive action was needed to ‘protect livelihoods and avoid a costly lifesaving emergency intervention’ six months in advance of the declaration of an emergency in Kenya (Hillier and Dempsey, 2012). Yet no early actions were mobilised. More than 75 warnings went unheeded, and drought resulted in a famine in which 250,000 people died (Parker, 2018).

Tracing how and when impacts evolve is particularly complex in drought conditions; even

within a country, the exact timeframes vary for different locations and livelihood groups, based on prior climatic conditions. Droughts are not the linear product of a single poor rainy season, but successive failed or poor rainy seasons. Yet they can be forecasted far in advance, providing ample opportunity for early action (Cardenas et al., 2016).

Early warning systems tend to track drought risk through indicators that signal food security problems (Tucker and Yirgu, 2011). In many cases, non-food responses are not as highly prioritised, and thus interventions can be insufficient to effectively protect livelihoods during drought response. These ‘non-food responses’ include water supply for people and livestock, nutritional and health interventions, support for agriculture marketing and hygiene and sanitation. To protect livelihoods, a focus on food and agriculture is certainly important, but early action can have a broader sectoral focus beyond a ‘food first’ culture that is slow to recognise the urgency of other types of intervention (Tucker and Yirgu, 2011). Similarly, UNHCR interviewees mentioned that protection rarely featured in early action initiatives, though drought is a known driver of conflict and displacement. Early action for displacement should incorporate UNHCR’s Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies (PPRE) approach, which guides planning and action in scenarios where the risk of a crisis is high, with refugee protection at the core of the potential response.

For early action to drought, careful timing of activities is critical to ensure interventions can be delivered in the window in which they may be

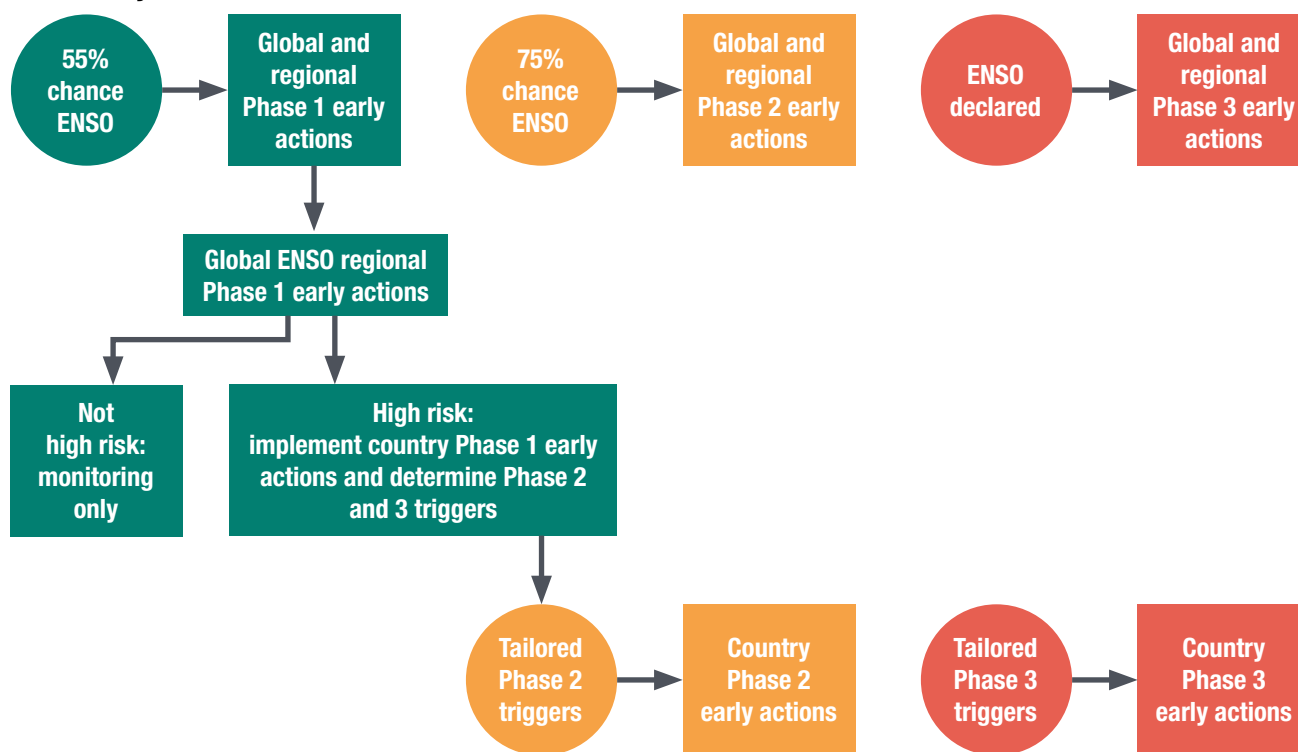
most appropriate – a failure of late responses in the past (Bailey, 2012). Planning for early action through SOPs or contingency plans can do this by working backwards from the time of expected peak humanitarian needs, in order to understand when actions may be appropriate, recognising that these timeframes may be different for farmers and pastoralists. An intervention could be moving into alert mode for one group, while operating under ‘normal’ circumstances for another. More so than other types of hazard, drought early action can be phased by season to progressively address and mitigate livelihood impacts. Stages are assessed by monitoring a bundle of indicators, which are aggregated to define whether they pass thresholds that indicate the situation is worsening.

One of the best examples of such an early action plan is the SOP guidance produced by the IASC to promote early action for El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO)-related extreme weather events. The IASC process focuses on a staged approach, with thresholds for triggering ENSO-related action at the global and regional

levels, aligned with the ERP (see Figure 2). At the national level, the trigger for the first phase may prompt an RC to update or implement ERP MPA and assess early warning system capabilities. The second phase includes implementing priority ERP APA, activating forecast-based budget lines and developing a coordinated emergency supply pre-positioning strategy. The final phase, which is triggered after a global-level declaration of an ENSO episode, includes implementing early action plans, working with forecasting and disaster risk management agencies to review impact-based forecast scenarios and activating country-based pooled funds.

At the sectoral level, FAO’s approach to designing early action to drought is one of the most developed among agencies engaged in anticipatory action. Yet even with FAO’s well-structured plans, support is not always timely, indicating the challenges in aligning support with livelihood needs. An evaluation of a 2017 early action intervention for pastoralists facing drought in Kenya found that livestock feed was distributed at the peak of livestock mortality in

Figure 2 IASC process for decision-making and triggering early action for El Niño/La Niña at global, regional and country level



Source: Adapted from IASC Reference Group on Risk, Early Warning and Preparedness, 2018.

Kwale County, rather than beforehand (FAO, 2018). Compared to the emergency response launched after the government declared an emergency, the FAO's intervention was three months early, and provided households with \$3.5-worth of benefits for every dollar invested (FAO, 2018). Still, early action should not be relative to the speed of emergency response, but enacted before the peak of humanitarian needs.

Because drought response can be challenging politically and technically, not all agencies working on FbA have attempted to design early action to drought. The Start Fund has a dedicated crisis anticipation window which has been used for drought in the past, but drought is often beyond its scope (Start, 2018). According to interviewees, the IFRC's forecast-based action is currently responsive to rapid-onset hazards like storms and flooding, rather than slow-onset hazards.

Insurance mechanisms have also been developed to manage drought risks. The Africa Risk Capacity (ARC) is an African Union (AU)-led financial entity that shares the risk of severe drought between signatory countries through a continental risk pool. It uses satellite weather surveillance software (Africa RiskView, developed by WFP) to estimate impact and trigger funding. Members of the ARC risk pool qualify for a payout when rainfall deviation is sufficiently severe that the estimated response costs cross a certain pre-defined threshold. Payouts are made within 2–4 weeks of the end of the rainfall season.

At the community level, Index-Based Livestock Insurance does something very similar. Launched in Marsabit, Kenya, in 2010, the scheme has been extended to Isiolo County and to the Oromiya Region of Ethiopia. Pastoralists can buy insurance at two levels before the rainy season starts, and will receive a payout if the index (the Normalised Difference Vegetation

Index (NDVI)) passes a certain threshold. NDVI, which is freely available and regularly updated, is an objective indicator that correlates strongly with forage availability.

The Horn of Africa Risk Transfer for Adaptation (HARITA) scheme offers a similar weather-based insurance product to smallholder farmers in Tigray, Ethiopia, in which clients can choose to pay for the insurance through their labour. Again, it uses an index, in this case for rainfall, to calculate payouts, rather than actual losses. The HARITA model bundles insurance, access to credit and risk reduction activities into a single package. It reaches a group (the poorest of the productive poor) who were previously thought to be uninsurable.

Lastly, social protection programmes can be deployed to act in advance of drought. In Kenya about 400,000 pastoralist households are registered in the Hunger Safety Net Programme, and 100,000 of those deemed to be most in need receive regular cash transfers. In times of drought, however, the programme temporarily scales up by making rapid cash transfers to some or all of the remaining 300,000 households. These additional households are in effect covered by an insurance policy – a social safety net that pays a cash transfer to a predefined group of pastoralists when the rains fail, without delay and without question.

The CERF provides basic guidance for accessing the Rapid Response mechanism for drought, as the triggers are less clear than for rapid-onset events. The CERF's primary eligibility criterion is demonstrating that there is something significantly worse than usual by comparing the current situation against historic 'normal' or 'drought year' indicators (CERF, n.d.). The same principle could be applied for acting in an anticipatory capacity, but substituting outcome indicators and needs assessments for forecasts and projections.

Figure 3 Timing of early actions for drought

Risk-informed development	Lead time: 10–12 months prior to expected peak needs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse past drought events, identifying vulnerable areas and producing hazard and vulnerability maps • Identify past health effects of drought • Assess capacity of partners to respond • Prepare SOP and agree thresholds or triggers for action
Phase 1 Early action	Lead time: 6 months prior to expected peak needs, onset of rainy season
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance procurement, pre-tendering, and detailing technical specifications of supplies • Finalise MOUs with implementing partners • Distribute drought-resistant seeds with trainings; promote home gardens • Identify vulnerable water points and rehabilitate where appropriate • Pre-position stocks of seeds for next agricultural cycle; ready for replanting in the event that seeds fail the first time as a result of a poor onset to rainy season • Prepare health zones with necessary supplies or trainings for historical drought-related illnesses
Phase 2 Early action	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribute equipment to improve access to water for motorised pumps, small-scale irrigation, water storage • Cash for work programmes to rehabilitate irrigation canals and irrigation wells, and to manage ponds and basins to capture water. To be implemented during the dry season (September–October) • Distribute materials for better storage of harvest • Promote local production of fodder by farmers affected by drought • Animal health treatment and vaccination; support to animal feed provision
Early response	Peak needs/declaration of emergency
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water tankering • Distribution of food or non-food items (NFIs)

3.2 Early action for severe flooding

In 2017, floods claimed more lives than any other type of natural hazard and affected the largest number of people – over 55 million (CRED, 2018). That same year, the CERF allocated \$19 million to meet flood-induced needs. As more people take up residence in areas that are vulnerable to flooding, and climate and environmental changes aggravate the intensity of flood events, the humanitarian consequences are likely to increase (ACAPS, 2012).

Although flood events can be of relatively short duration, their impacts in terms of loss of life, shelter, property and livelihoods can endure for years after the waters recede. These impacts manifest rapidly – interviewees in this study noted that the most important impacts (loss of life, infrastructure and livelihoods) occur within the first day or two, when it is hardest for first

responders to reach people. Waterlogging can kill crops and livestock.

While there are different types of floods, FbA pilot projects focus mainly on riverine floods, which can be better forecast than other types of floods. In some countries, riverine floods are a seasonal or annual event, caused by upstream rainfall or snowmelt. In rare cases, however, they can be caused by the failure of dams upstream. Riverine floods tend to cover vast areas and large populations (Cosgrove, 2014). Flash floods are much harder to anticipate, as they occur suddenly as a consequence of very heavy rainfall and with little warning. Despite their intensity, these floods are limited in scale and are not currently the focus of flood FbA projects. Forecasts for flash floods need to be based on very high-resolution modelling, which is often not readily available.

Box 3 An overview of early action for floods

Without anticipatory action, when do impacts appear?

Impacts from flooding manifest rapidly; the greatest impacts occur within the first three days of the start of the emergency. Immediate impacts tend to be loss of life, damage to infrastructure and loss of livelihoods (crops and livestock). People die as a result of drowning and trauma before water has receded. In longer timeframes, mortality related to flooding is a product of poor water, sanitation and hygiene, inadequate shelter and high exposure to disease vectors.

What are the lead times for these impacts?

Precipitation forecasts tend to have a skill of a week or less in most parts of the world. Early actions in existing SOPs range between 15-, 10-, 5- and 3-day lead times.

What kinds of forecasts exist?

The availability of forecasts depends on the river basin in question and national hydrometeorological services.

- GLOWFAS – a global river flows forecast with probabilistic forecasts; bias corrected daily using observations, with lead times up to 45 days.
- GLOFFIS – a global river flows probabilistic forecast, produced daily with lead times of up to ten days. The forecast is produced by Deltares, a Dutch research institute focused on surface and sub-surface water.
- MAPROOM – a tool to see where heavy rainfall is expected.
- Regional Climate Outlook Forums through the World Meteorological Organization.

What actions are appropriate for mitigating impacts and saving lives?

- Communicate flood risk information.
- Emergency stockpiling of shelter materials, NFIs, food, water.
- Distribute cash through social protection systems.
- Evacuate livestock or harvest crops in anticipation of floods.
- Clear canals or install gabion walls to protect from impacts.

Sources: IFRC, 2018; Start Network, 2018; ACAPS, 2012.

As a hydro-meteorological phenomenon, floods have significant early action potential – but a relatively small window for action. Global forecasts give warning roughly 15 days in advance, but the forecasting skill is generally clear enough to act about a week out (Wilkinson et al., 2018). Even so, seasonal forecasts three to four months in advance should be the starting point for early action planning, and for consolidating lessons from prior years' responses during the monsoon or rainy season.

In humanitarian responses to flooding, distributing cash is often a sensible choice, and increasingly FbA pilots are replicating this. Cash is helpful because needs assessments quickly become irrelevant when displaced people return home and flood waters recede (Cosgrove, 2014). Whether cash is an appropriate intervention *before* a flood hits is not yet well evidenced (see

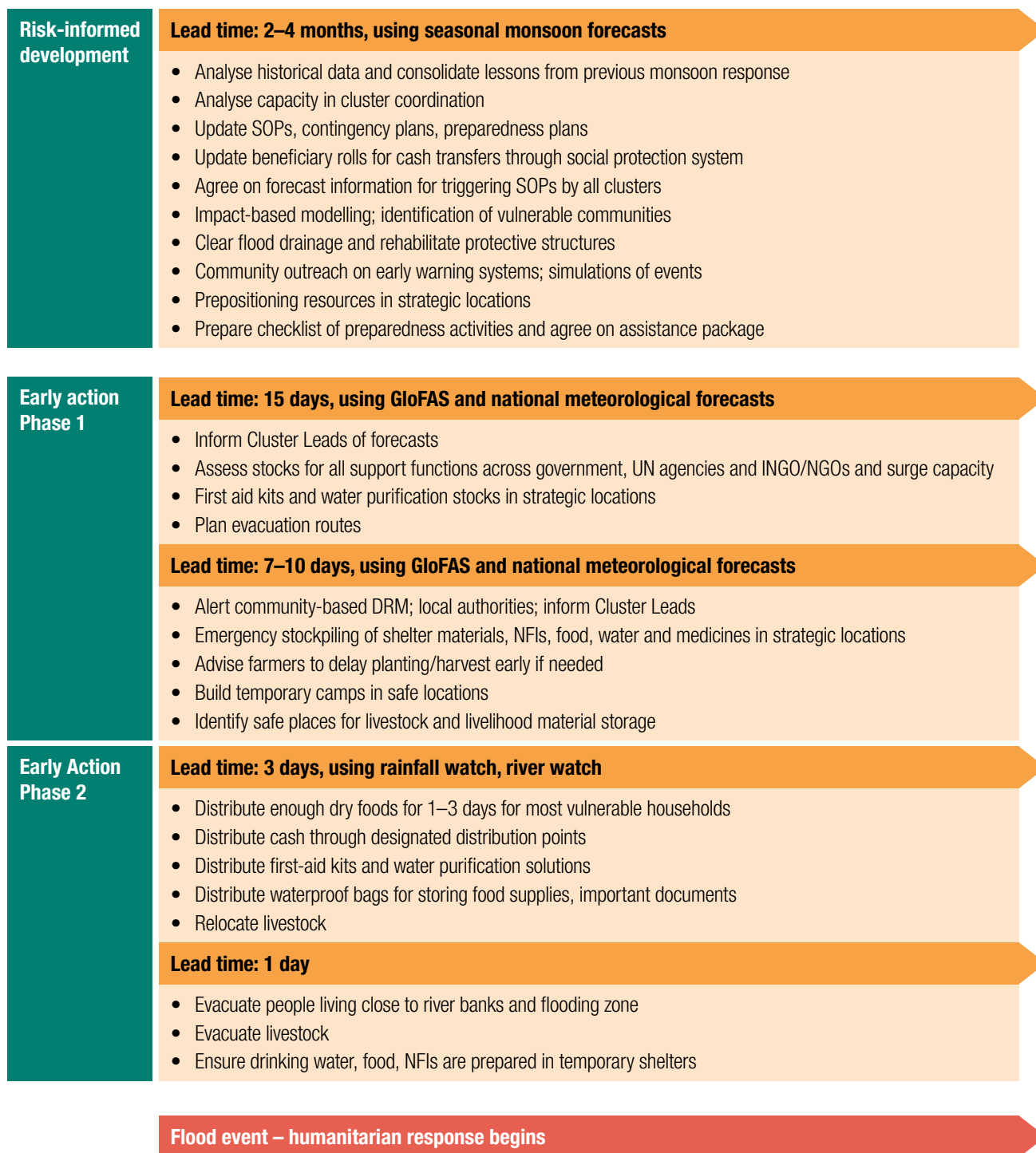
Tanner et al., 2019; Weingärtner et al., 2019). Targeting support in the short timeframes that forecasts allow is highly challenging. It may be more appropriate to use forecasts for collective action to prepare for and initiate a well-organised response, rather than delivering goods or cash in advance. The Start Fund's anticipatory finance for flooding on the other hand has focused on community-level readiness; for example, an anticipation alert for flooding and landslides in Tajikistan resulted in an early action intervention to build gabion walls and dig channels to redirect floodwaters (Start Network, 2018).

For UN partners, financing early action for flood events may be best focused on improving emergency communication, coordination and stockpiling supplies to reduce the gap between the flood event and the arrival of humanitarian support. This, in effect, means financing advanced

humanitarian readiness for an early response. This is different from a typical rapid response, as it relies on forecast data in order to deliver support in the immediate aftermath of a flood, when international support is still days or weeks away. When humanitarian aid is delayed due to difficulties

in accessing support, people are particularly vulnerable to secondary flood impacts such as disease outbreaks. Many of these impacts can be mitigated by a well-organised response that can quickly provide medical care, sanitation and hygiene facilities and adequate nutrition to affected people.

Figure 4 Timing of early actions for severe floods



3.3 Early action for tropical storms

In 2017, the CERF allocated \$28.3 million to respond to cyclones, typhoons and hurricanes. The same year, storms accounted for the greatest losses from any disaster type – \$285 billion, equivalent to more than 14 times the losses caused by floods, the next most destructive disaster type.

In terms of early action, tropical storm forecasts offer very short windows for action – smaller even than for flood events. Existing SOPs for cyclones tend to allow for less than a week of direct action: WHO's SOPs for the Philippines, for example, begin with a 72-hour lead time, and the IFRC operates under similar timeframes (when there is a forecast with 70% accuracy). The Start Fund's

guidance on early action sets out activities that begin four days in advance of a cyclone hitting land.

Acting in advance of a tropical storm poses significant logistical challenges because of the short timeframes and difficulty in predicting the coordinates where the storm will make landfall. Even when there is greater certainty about when and where a storm will make landfall, it can be dangerous to encourage evacuation because people travelling on roads near the coast are vulnerable to storm surge. Early action initiatives have not always been capable of addressing these logistical challenges. A Start Network application for an intervention to anticipate Caribbean hurricanes (Irma and Jose) was declined as 'there was a feeling that activities would be too late, as the hurricane

Box 4 An overview of early action for tropical storms (typhoons, cyclones and hurricanes)

Without anticipatory action, when do impacts appear?

Like flooding, impacts from tropical storms manifest rapidly, and the immediate impacts tend to be loss of life, damage to infrastructure and loss of livelihoods. Extreme winds and rainfall wipe out crops, aquaculture and livestock.

What are the lead times for these impacts?

Storm tracks can be forecasted up to 72 hours in advance, but accurately predicting the exact location, timing and strength of a cyclone's landfall is challenging. According to ACAPS, wind speed can be accurately forecasted, and windspeed has a large bearing on the impact of a storm. Storm surge and rainfall predictions are less reliable.

Practitioners in the Red Cross working on early action for typhoons pointed to forecasts from ten to six days in advance of landfall, but the accuracy of these forecasts is low so far in advance. The Red Cross was considering activating three days in advance, with 70% accuracy.

What kind of forecasts exists?

- National meteorological agencies.
- NASA's Joint Typhoon Warning Center.
- The National Hurricane Center tracks and predicts tropical weather systems between the Prime Meridian and the 140th meridian west poleward to the 30th parallel north in the north-east Pacific Ocean and the 31st parallel north in the northern Atlantic Ocean.
- World Meteorological Organization.

What actions are appropriate for mitigating impacts and saving lives?

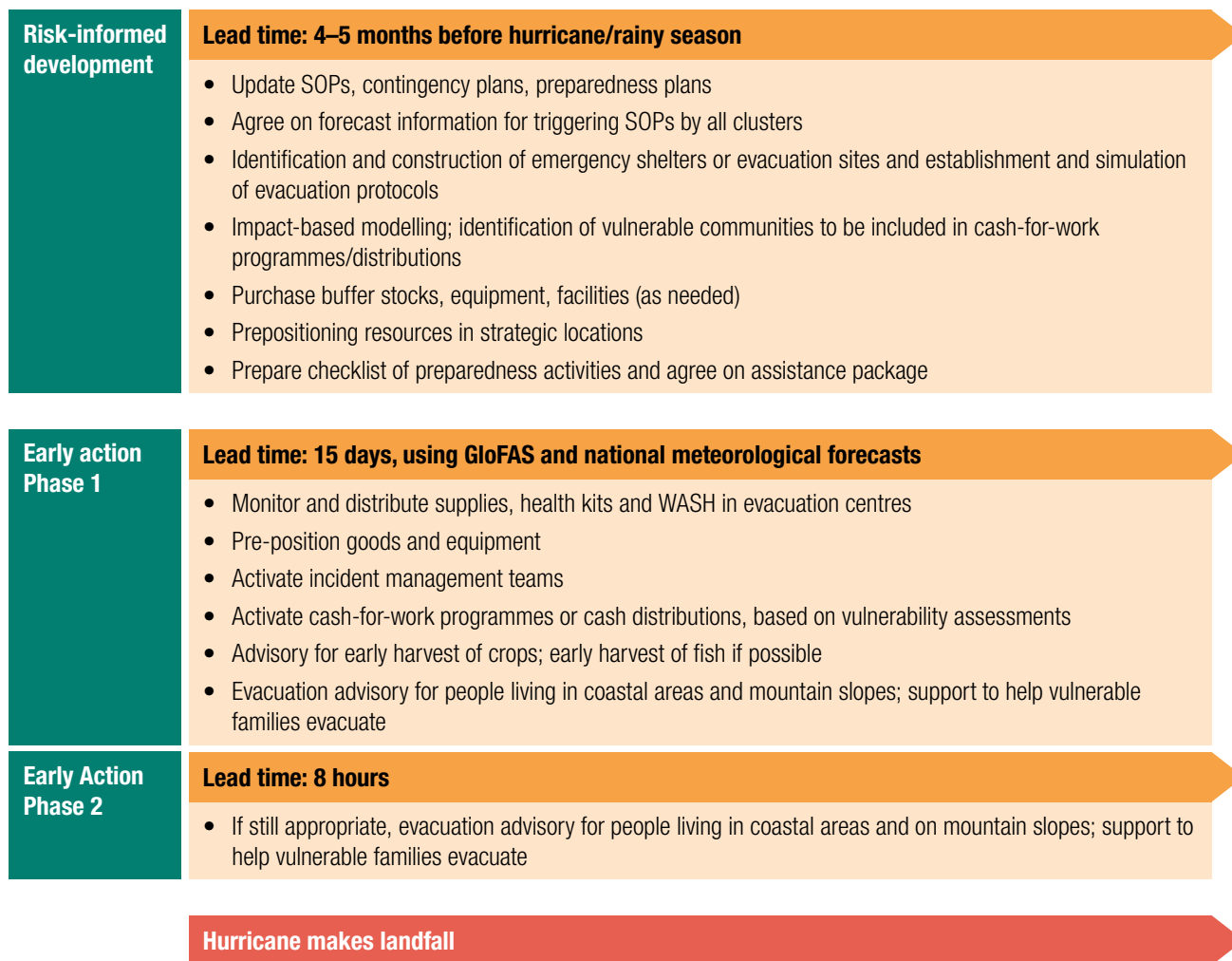
- Communication of early warning information.
- Anticipatory cash disbursements or cash-for-work programmes for farmers and fishers.
- Reinforcing shelters/safe spaces in advance.
- Preparing and pre-positioning disaster supplies for vulnerable communities (water, medicine, non-perishable foods, NFIs).
- Pre-emptive evacuation of people facing imminent threat.

Sources: ACAPS, 2011; Start Network, 2018.

would have already made landfall by the time projects commenced’ (Start Network, 2017). The partners proposed evacuation and shelter work to support household protective measures to save lives. Members at the time noted that ‘no other donors are supporting an anticipatory response’.

Ultimately, the decision-making committee felt that activities should have begun a few days earlier to justify undertaking ‘early action’. Although the committee considered financing an early response, it concluded that the scale of the emergency was beyond the Start Fund’s mandate.

Figure 5 Timing of early action for tropical storms



3.4 Early action for epidemics

If you wait until the number of cases and deaths is noticeable, you are condemned to watch the outbreak grow while you do your best to treat those already sick (WHO interviewee, October 2018).

Box 5 An overview of early action for epidemics

Without anticipatory action, when do impacts appear?

Impacts on the population are assumed to begin at the onset of an outbreak.

What are the lead times for these impacts?

The time between an outbreak and an epidemic (and whether an epidemic occurs at all) depends on how effective early detection and containment interventions are. In West Africa in 2014, the Ebola outbreak was confirmed in late March and a public health emergency was declared in early August, four and a half months between detection and epidemic.

What kind of forecasts exist?

Probabilistic forecasting for epidemics is still in its infancy. A WHO informal consultation on anticipating epidemics emphasised that surveillance is still fundamentally reactive. Even so, early detection and mass communication about risks are key to reducing impacts.

What actions are appropriate for mitigating impacts and saving lives?

- Early warning and response systems for outbreak monitoring and surveillance.
- Community outreach for case identification and prevention education.
- Preparation of supplies and equipment (protective equipment, vaccinations, etc.).
- Mass vaccination (in case of a large outbreak or where the risk of spreading is high).

Sources: WHO, 2014; 2016.

Humanitarian response to epidemics is different than responses to other crises. Humanitarian support in an epidemic must reach *all* people affected *at the same time* (as opposed to just the most vulnerable) to control the spread of the outbreak (International Rescue Committee, 2018). This challenge requires an approach backed by a strong information system that can identify when and where cases appear, accompanied by mass community outreach to communicate risk information.

Interviewees for this study emphasised that early action for epidemics is contingent on early detection. By the time the scale of the disease outbreak is known, the event is typically large enough that the only response strategy is containment (International Rescue Committee, 2018). To improve early detection, the WHO has developed the Early Warning and Response Network (EWARN), a tool to detect and quickly respond to outbreaks of epidemic-prone diseases. EWARN comprises both an immediate alert component, where early stages of an outbreak are communicated directly to focal points at the subnational level, and a weekly reporting component, which aggregates data to track trends (WHO, 2012). Early detection is particularly important for Ebola, yellow fever, meningitis, cholera and measles. Another tool for detection is the Epidemic Intelligence from Open Sources (EIOS) system, which WHO and health partners use to anticipate and address the impact of disease outbreaks. The EIOS system sifts through data, including social media, to detect and verify outbreak events before they become epidemics (GHO, 2019).

WHO also has a Contingency Fund for Emergencies (CFE), which releases funds quickly to address public health emergencies. In 2017, allocations of \$500,000 or less were transferred within a single day to WHO offices in affected countries (WHO, 2018). The allocations fund disease surveillance, the provision of essential medicines, training of health workers and public awareness campaigns. The CERF and the WHO CFE are aligned but not interchangeable, as the CERF also funds other UN agencies involved in epidemic response. If the CERF were to finance early action for epidemics, it might consider reimbursing WHO CFE expenses and working

in alignment with the contingency fund, as explained in a WHO report:

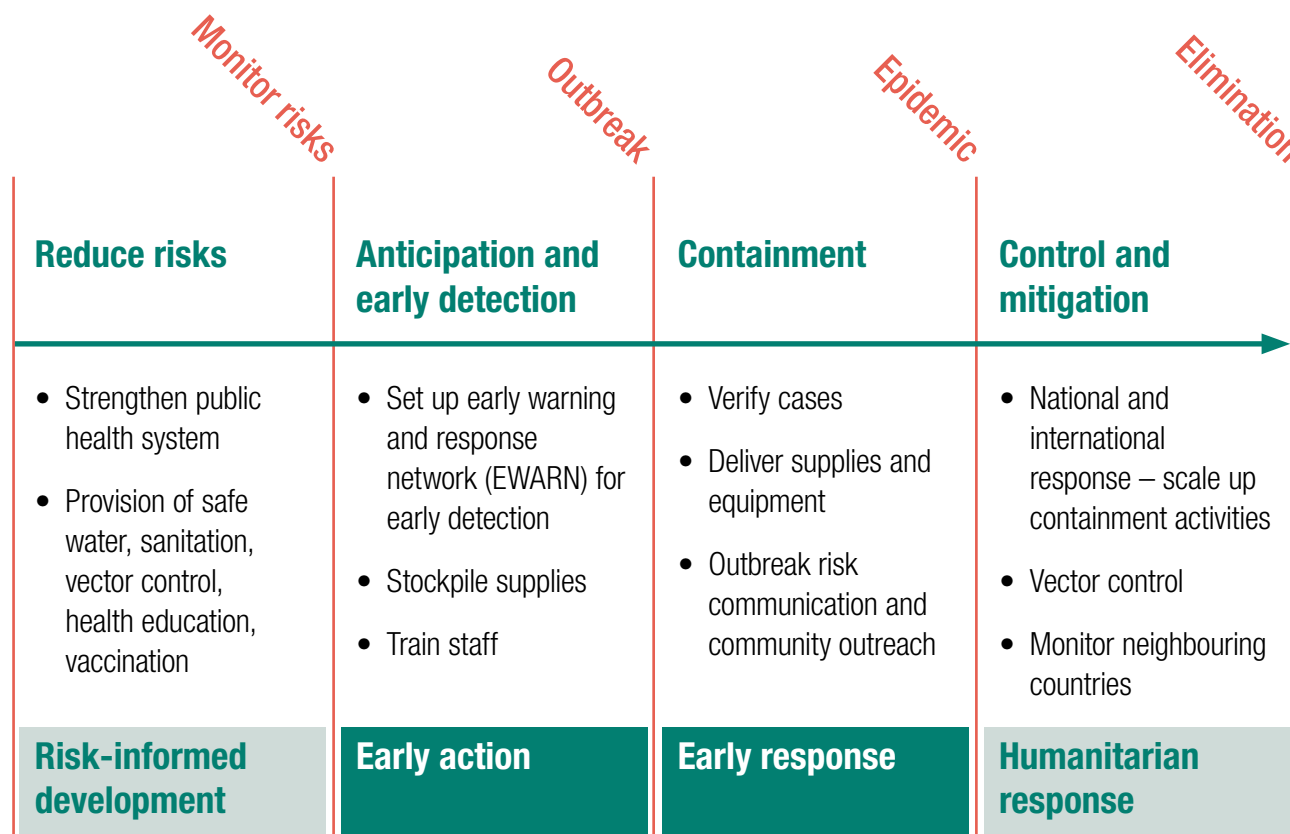
The criteria for CERF funding are based on the idea of prioritising life-saving assistance, and often exclude many of the preparedness, human resources, and capacity strengthening activities necessary during the initial phases of WHO’s response to outbreaks and humanitarian emergencies. The different funding criteria used by the WHO CFE and the CERF are contributory factors to the reluctance of CERF to approve funds for CFE reimbursement (WHO, 2016).

To cover the financing gap between the early stages of an outbreak and a pandemic crisis, the World Bank launched a financing mechanism called the Pandemic Emergency Facility (PEF) in July 2017. The PEF has two windows. The first, established in July 2017, is a parametric insurance window triggered when the outbreak

reaches a particular level of severity, funded through premiums paid by donors. The second, launched in 2018, provides flexible funding to address emerging pathogens that do not meet the criteria of the insurance facility, or for severe single-country outbreaks.

Rather than duplicating the objectives of PEF, CERF allocations are complementary, focusing on actions when risks are elevated but prior to an outbreak, or when the outbreak remains below the threshold for the PEF parametric triggers (the CERF currently uses WHO alert and epidemic thresholds). If the CERF were to expand its criteria to focus more explicitly on early action for epidemics, it could consider financing a range of new activities in high-risk contexts: for example, supporting systems for early detection, mass outreach to change key risk behaviours, training staff in response and stockpiling supplies. It should do so in coordination or partnership with the WHO CFE, which is directly aligned with these early action objectives (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 Timing of early action for epidemics



Adapted from WHO, 2018.

The decision to fund these actions would not be unprecedented. Kellet and Peters (2014) found a range of CERF-funded projects with elements of what they deemed ‘emergency preparedness’, but which fall within the remit of early action as defined in this study. These actions included hygiene promotion campaigns in Djibouti, South Sudan, Chad and Zimbabwe to respond to the spread of winterbourne diseases, procuring stockpiles and improved early diagnosis of health-, nutrition- and WASH-related ailments in Nepal, and training for community workers on cholera prevention in Chad (Kellet and Peters, 2014).

Of the FbA initiatives reviewed for this study, only the Start Fund has published a case study about acting early to respond to an epidemic. The threshold for early action for epidemics is enacted ‘after the identification of a zero case, but before the likely spread of a disease in the surrounding environment’. Start Network members have proposed activities that could mitigate anticipated disease outbreaks, including advocacy and communication to vulnerable people, risk mapping and monitoring and steps to strengthen surge health systems. In one alert in 2016, partners responded to a rise in dengue fever cases by providing equipment and surge capacity to medical staff, conducting prevention activities to reduce the proliferation of mosquitoes, and mass communication of messages about recognising symptoms (Start Network, 2017).

3.5 Early action for conflict and political instability

In 2017, the UN Secretary-General argued that ‘we spend far more time and resources responding to [conflict-related] crises rather than preventing them’.⁴ Responding to conflict-related humanitarian needs currently takes up most of the CERF’s resources: in 2017, 65% of CERF funding was spent responding to conflict-related crises. The humanitarian consequences of war and violence are manifold – loss of life, destruction of property, services and markets, forced displacement and degradation of social networks.

Although many interviewees felt intuitively or from experience that it could be possible

to act in advance of a conflict, early action for conflict-related emergencies was associated with higher levels of uncertainty than other crises. Appropriate early action to conflict is harder to define, partly because it does not easily nestle between clear bio-physical or socioeconomic thresholds and an expected hazard.

This study was not prescriptive about what kind of early action RC/HCs or UN agencies should consider in relation to conflict. Early action is associated with *mitigation* of the impact of a crisis, and this may explain why interviewees’ answers largely focused on preventive diplomacy and community mediation. Some interviewees also mentioned that early action in relation to conflict could facilitate preparations for large-scale displacement, but how and what early actions could be taken in this respect were not detailed. Political engagement may not be appropriate for a humanitarian fund like the CERF, but financing early action in anticipation of large-scale displacement, disruption to markets or a breakdown of health systems is within a humanitarian remit and could be appropriate. The technical details of these types of early action interventions, however, require further specific study, with a focus on crises where this has been done successfully in the past.

Conflicts are difficult to anticipate and forecast, though various early warning systems exist, linked to interventions that span preventive diplomacy, incentives or sanctions to influence the behaviour of parties to the conflict (Rohwerder, 2015). Early warning mechanisms operate at different scales, from community-based, national to regional systems. These systems are subject to the same flaws as early warning systems for natural hazards. An OECD (2009) review concluded that early warning and early response are poorly linked. Although political will is commonly cited as the primary factor preventing early response, the report argues that weak warnings, immature response instruments and individual and institutional shortfalls play a large role when early warning systems fail to produce early action.

4 See www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-01-10/secretary-generals-remarks-security-council-open-debate-maintenance.

Box 6 An overview of early action for conflict

Without anticipatory action, when do impacts appear?

The possibility of conflict and small-scale clashes can disrupt livelihoods, increase living costs and fuel social discontent before a conflict actually breaks out, but most humanitarian impacts begin when violence breaks out at scale or in the immediate aftermath of key trigger events (elections, coups, etc.).

What are the lead times for these impacts?

Lead times for early action to conflict are inherently uncertain, and reviews of early warning systems do not assess them for the timeliness of their analysis. The Start Fund has identified a number of possible trigger events, including elections, currency crises, the assassination or arrest of key actors, military coups and capital flight.

What kinds of forecasts exist?

- Conflict early warning systems (CEWARN in East Africa, National Early Warning Systems in West Africa).

- Non-governmental early warning systems (International Crisis Group).
- Human Rights Watch reports; OCHA data on humanitarian needs; UNHCR data on displacement; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), etc.

The predictive capacity of conflict early warning systems varies; some quantitative methods have a relatively strong predictive capacity in relation to political crises (over 80% accuracy), but the vast majority of forecasts are rarely assessed for accuracy.

What actions are appropriate for mitigating impacts and saving lives?

- Prepositioning supplies to meet the basic needs of displaced people.
- Prepare cash transfer or voucher programmes for IDPs.
- Prepare safe spaces to receive displaced people.
- Prepare for humanitarian access issues to improve speed of response.

Sources: OECD, 2009; Start Fund, 2018; Start Network, 2018.

In discussions with RC/HCs, UN agencies and those working on early action pilots, early action to conflict fell into two categories. The first deals with political engagement to avoid electoral violence, and the second focuses on anticipating displacement or a spike in humanitarian needs within an existing crisis. Some interviewees suggested that early action should focus on preparing for expected displacement or acting rapidly to accommodate displaced people. The underlying logic is that displacement could be a precursor to a much larger wave of violence. Acting quickly to prepare for or respond to small displacements could help prime humanitarian systems to respond to greater needs if and when they arise, as well as easing tensions between refugees and host communities. One example of good practice highlighted by interviewees was humanitarian action in Mosul, Iraq, in anticipation

of mass displacement as a result of violence in the city in May 2017. Humanitarians pre-positioned life-saving assistance through a Rapid Response Mechanism, allowing the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), WFP and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to quickly coordinate to accommodate an expected 180,000 people (WFP et al., 2017).

RC/HCs in conflict-affected countries also suggested that early action could be taken in advance of political crises and electoral violence. The types of action suggested focused on preventive diplomacy and mediation. One RC pointed out that early action to electoral violence was not necessarily useful in the immediate pre-election period; rather, early action should engage with the electoral cycle months in advance, when electoral commissions are established and when the rules of engagement are defined. Others suggested two months as a feasible window

for pre-election interventions. In other cases, when a leader refuses to respect term limits or election results, early action may resemble a swift diplomatic response before the event escalates into a larger conflict. From RC/

HCs in conflict-affected states, the primary recommendation for pre-conflict early action was to consider a surge facility building on existing conflict prevention and peace-building initiatives and enabling them to scale if needed.

4 What kinds of early actions do UN agencies and RC/HCs want to take?

4.1 Perspectives from RC/HCs and UN agencies

The idea is to see preparedness and response linked together. You'd call it early or advanced humanitarian readiness (UN Resident Coordinator interviewee, September 2018).

This section reflects on the kinds of actions RC/HCs would like to be taking in advance of an impending crisis.

Although organisational mandates dictate that people operate within clean confines, many of those closer to the ground argued that these activities often naturally blur into each other in the heat of an impending crisis. Definitions of what constituted 'early action' were not fixed, but malleable depending on the circumstances. As described in the previous section, many interviewees were keen that the CERF fund early actions in stages, similar to those in existing SOPs. The first stage would launch preparedness work based on seasonal forecasts for floods, droughts, and storms, using core funding or additional donor funds where possible. If the threshold or trigger was crossed, then CERF finance for early action could be released, focusing on mitigating impacts and preparing to respond. Finally, the third stage would be a full humanitarian response. CERF funding would therefore help mitigate impacts, but also send a signal to other donors of the severity of the situation.

4.1.1 Pre-positioning supplies

Even when a response was fully funded, it could take months to procure and deliver supplies, missing the peak of needs. As one RC explained, 'humanitarian planning cycles are totally off scale with the evolution of crises'. Doing this pre-positioning was described by interviewees as 'advanced humanitarian readiness', intended to ensure that humanitarian response could be enacted earlier and faster based on a forecast or changing risk information.

Pre-positioning supplies was both a common and controversial suggestion from RC/HCs. Although the CERF's life-saving criteria explicitly state that it should not support 'regular agency stockpiling or pre-positioning of relief goods', this type of advanced humanitarian action was considered a key component of enacting early action by RC/HCs interviewed, as well as interviewees from UNICEF, UNDP, FAO and WFP. UN agencies have internal preparedness plans, but interviewees stressed that resources were not sufficient for them to undertake early action to replenish or pre-position supplies. Such 'advanced humanitarian readiness' actions should only form one small part of enacting early action, with the bulk of attention focused on monitoring risks, delivering actions based on triggers and effectively coordinating support that protects livelihoods.

Interviewees working on the IASC's ERP approach did not consider pre-positioning supplies as part of early action, but other interviewees from organisations already implementing early action pilots had mixed views. Staff working on

IFRC forecast-based finance pilots, for example, explicitly stated that pre-positioning aid could qualify as early action, while interviewees from the Start Fund said that they were doubtful that pre-positioning should qualify. For situations of conflict and displacement, the Start Fund would not encourage large-scale pre-positioning without specific justifications (i.e. it could be acceptable in locations that are remote and easily cut off, or to ensure that medical supplies are available where there has been a disease outbreak). The anticipation window should not be used by NGOs to fill their warehouses.

Those who advocated for more funding to pre-position and stockpile supplies agreed that CERF funding should not be used to pre-position all materials in all places, but to mobilise and prepare supplies in areas that may be inaccessible at the time of the humanitarian response. Supplies could be delivered to existing warehouses or temporary logistics hubs to reduce the time it takes to deliver assistance. Some suggested stockpiling materials two to four months in advance of a forecast of a particularly intense hazard. RC/HCs mentioned that agricultural inputs or NFIs could be stockpiled, but this type of ‘advanced humanitarian readiness’ could equally include priming systems for cash transfers to ensure disbursements are well-targeted in the lead-up to a crisis. For contexts of chronic food insecurity, stockpiling well in advance of expected peak malnutrition can have a dramatically positive effect on the timeliness of the response, though this is currently considered a ‘preparedness’ measure and not within the realm of early action for many humanitarian agencies.⁵

4.1.2 Shock-responsive social protection

There is growing evidence that the consumption needs and productivity of poor and vulnerable groups can be cost-effectively protected through scalable safety net programmes and insurance schemes. Tanzania and Senegal have dramatically scaled up the coverage of their flagship programmes, and in Ethiopia in 2011 the Productive Safety Net Program expanded its

coverage from 6.5 million people to 9.6 million in response to drought conditions.

RC/HCs interviewed were enthusiastic about the possibility of CERF funds being channelled through national social protection systems. In this scenario, CERF funding could deliver cash transfers or food aid through existing social protection systems to help people cope with a specific, impending hazard. The CERF has supported humanitarian response through social protection systems in Fiji after Cyclone Winston, but this was in a traditional humanitarian response mode rather than prior to the storm making landfall. Delivering support through social protection systems in advance of crises has been trialled in East Africa to help vulnerable households deal with droughts and the impacts of floods, but the approach is still in its infancy.

There is little evidence to date on the benefits of delivering cash early (as opposed to during or after a crisis) in terms of relieving suffering and saving lives. To expand the evidence base, efforts to work through national protection systems should be accompanied with research that tracks the impacts of early action compared to those of a traditional humanitarian response.

Working through social protection systems was valued as a method of making humanitarian support more transparent and reducing opportunities for corruption. It could also build on national efforts to identify and understand vulnerability, though people who are vulnerable to hazards may not also qualify for social protection under normal programming criteria, and those that are targeted by social protection schemes may not be those most at risk of hazard impacts (Weingartner et al., 2019). This would require supporting the expansion of social protection systems to accommodate additional recipients. Doing so, however, is not the role of the CERF; building such a system is more within the remit of development or resilience programmes.

4.1.3 Improved risk communication

RC/HCs suggested that more funds were needed to communicate risks and warnings with practical advice on how to mitigate impacts on people

5 KII with OECD expert.

living in hazard-prone areas, particularly for common risks. This recommendation centred primarily on ensuring that people understood warnings and could be proactive in mitigating risks, especially in places where the heterogeneity of the population greatly increases the complexity of communicating warnings. RC/HCs suggested that improved communication should also include local authorities at the municipal and district levels, who would be the first responders in the event of a rapid-onset event. This is an important action, but does not fall under the remit of early action or advanced humanitarian readiness and may not be appropriate for the CERF.

4.1.4 Pre-assessments or faster needs assessments

The impacts of a hazard are often predicted but there is no formal mechanism that links these to requests for funding. For drought in particular, there was a recommendation to allow for pre-assessments before a situation tips over into a more serious humanitarian crisis. For flooding and other rapid-onset events, RC/HCs remarked that being bound to government needs assessments can slow responses by weeks.

The Start Fund provides funds for interagency needs assessments prior to a crisis to identify an appropriate course of action. In some instances, when the needs assessment revealed that the scale of the emergency would be beyond the capacity of the Start Fund, they were able to use this to mobilise funds from donors. CERF already funds interagency needs assessments, so financing pre-assessments would not be significant departure from this.

4.1.5 Livelihood support

Providing livelihood support to people affected by a slow-onset hazard was mentioned in passing, but otherwise did not feature in the types of anticipatory interventions that RC/HCs were considering. Still, they repeatedly mentioned that acting early would support people's coping strategies and help them maintain their livelihoods. This is aligned with the types of interventions the CERF already supports, such as funding early response in the Sahel in 2018 through agricultural livelihood support.

These livelihood support activities are part and parcel of FAO, WFP, Start Network and

IFRC responses. Actions include distributing drought-resistant seeds and promoting local fodder production after initial harvest failures, commercial destocking for pastoralists facing drought and cash-for-work programmes to harvest key crops in advance of a coming typhoon. These interventions need to be delivered on a sufficient scale to protect people's assets and avoid longer-term destitution.

4.1.6 Jump-starting a larger humanitarian response

Although the CERF's rapid response mechanism is fast relative to most funding instruments, interviewees emphasised that humanitarian response still needs to be accelerated. Early action was described as a means of priming the humanitarian system by delivering support prior to a full-scale response. The CERF could be used to enable procuring, stockpiling, pre-positioning and distributing food, shelter and NFIs prior to an emergency. The CERF's existing funding criteria allow for early project start dates for Rapid Response grants, where the CERF can reimburse activities implemented prior to the grant disbursement date, but not prior to the start of the emergency. This rule could be revised to allow activities to be carried out in accordance with phased early action triggers elaborated in SOPs or contingency plans.

4.1.7 Early detection of epidemics and promoting behaviour change

Interviewees for this study emphasised that any early action for epidemics is contingent on early detection. By the time the public is aware of a disease outbreak, the event is typically large enough that the only response strategy is containment (WHO interviewee, September 2018). Although the CERF would not be expected or able to support WHO's EWARN system in every emergency situation, it could reinforce it in circumstances of particularly high risk.

In addition to early detection, early action for epidemics could entail training medical staff, delivering medical supplies and treating initial cases. Interviews with UN agencies emphasised the need to accompany these efforts with outreach to promote behaviour change and communicate risk information.

4.1.8 Protecting the CERF's core functions

Although early action might be a valuable concept, the CERF is not necessarily the right, or only, instrument to finance it. One RC expressed the view that the CERF's current role enforced a 'discipline' to humanitarian action, with its narrow focus on responding to new and underfunded humanitarian emergencies. This interviewee was wary of opening up the CERF to actions that could be less urgent, and may be subject to far more scope for interpretation.

Similarly, staff from UNHCR feared that an early action initiative could take badly needed humanitarian funding away from emergencies, and that development finance is better suited for early action. Meanwhile, although it is challenging to find resources to cover 'advanced preparedness activities', UNHCR is already able to do so for refugee crises using core funding. In cases where CERF allocations had been made earlier, UNHCR staff believed that these interventions did not prioritise protection. They suggested protection work was an important dimension of early action as natural hazards can be drivers of conflict and displacement.

RC/HCs consistently emphasised that they valued access to the CERF's core functions because it was considered rapid and flexible compared to other humanitarian funding mechanisms. Some RC/HCs said that they would

be reluctant to take early action if they feared it would jeopardise their access to the CERF for a later response to humanitarian needs during an emergency. This speaks to the importance of ensuring that the CERF has sufficient budget to cover both objectives in its mandate. An expanded CERF would ease these fears on the part of RC/HCs, and the cost savings from acting early should free up resources for humanitarian response.

RC/HCs require clarity about whether early action allocations would be larger to account for both anticipation and response, or whether they are eligible to apply twice for CERF funding. A perception that eligibility for CERF funding would be jeopardised if additional funding were needed is not entirely new – an evaluation of the CERF's role in the 2011 Somalia drought response noted that the request for funding was late because an earlier underfunded emergency round in the first quarter of the year had led to a perception that it would not respond positively to a second request soon after the initial underfunded emergencies (UFE) allocation (Taylor, 2012). In this instance, the CERF chose to disburse funding twice. Without clarity on how funding will be allocated between early action and response, there is a serious risk that humanitarian stakeholders will neglect early action opportunities when they arise, or that humanitarian support itself will be inadequate due to insufficient allocation to response.

5 Conclusion

‘It’s critical that we are realistic about what phase the CERF can work in [for rapid-onset events]. There is still a gap after an emergency begins and before help arrives. Don’t be so puritanical in defining early action windows’ (IFRC interviewee, October 2018).

Because of the time it takes to mobilise a humanitarian response, the CERF is simply not as fast as it could be. The disbursement of funds and decision-making is relatively quick, but interviewees stressed that there is still a gap between when a crisis begins and when support arrives, largely due to the time it takes to procure materials and marshal a response. Funding early action could catalyse much faster delivery of aid for rapid-onset crises and include earlier actions to mitigate impacts from slow-onset events.

Early actions differ from the kinds of activities that the CERF already funds under its life-saving criteria in timing more than in content. With few exceptions (see early action to epidemics and conflict), the types of actions that are included in the CERF’s life-saving criteria could feasibly be deployed earlier to mitigate some of the impacts of an impending crisis (see Section 3.3).

Some actions will produce cost savings for the CERF and save time in the humanitarian response by encouraging UN agencies to invest in advanced humanitarian readiness actions before the onset of an emergency. Investing in emergency preparedness can yield an estimated average saving in response time of 14 days, time that would have been spent on procuring, shipping and getting materials through customs, lengthy assessment processes and developing programme cooperation agreements (PCAs)

with relevant partners (Boston Consulting Group, 2017).

Although funding for early action can come from other sources, a specific advantage of CERF funding for early action is its signalling role, alerting others to the gravity of a humanitarian crisis. This could be instrumental in attracting additional finance from other development and humanitarian actors.

For UN agencies with internal contingency budgets, acting early offers significant cost savings; a 2017 interagency study on return on investment from emergency preparedness investments (many of which fell within this study’s definition of ‘advanced humanitarian readiness’) found the median savings-to-investment ratio was \$1.5 per \$1 invested. With more predictability from the CERF about when and what kinds of early actions will be funded, including pre-positioning supplies in high-risk locations, UN agencies can deploy internal contingency budgets confident that some level of funding will be reimbursed by the CERF when an early action allocation is made.

There is therefore a strong case for the CERF to fund well-planned and well-sequenced early actions to humanitarian crises. While this already happens on an ad hoc basis, the CERF secretariat should formalise finance for early action by issuing clear guidance on what kinds of actions can be funded and what risk information is permissible for applications, and setting out expectations for early action planning. In the pilot phase, this may require more intensive engagement with RC/HCs and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) in select pilot countries to improve understanding of the approach and ensure that applications are fit for purpose.

6 Recommendations for the CERF

6.1 Trial a bifurcated approach: early action for slow- and fast-onset events

Early action projects to date have been driven by a process of learning by doing, trialling different interventions with a relatively small geographic focus.⁶ For the CERF, early action would be a much greater endeavour: a humanitarian effort implemented at the national level through the UNCT/HCT, but directed globally wherever potential impacts are predicted. Rather than replicating the Start Fund or IFRC, WFP and FAO interventions, the CERF could take a dual approach to early action – one with different objectives for rapid- and slow-onset events:

- For slow-onset events, longer timeframes for action allow for more sophisticated livelihood and social protection interventions. These should be sequenced appropriately, with government services and development actors assigned roles within contingency plans that begin when seasonal forecasts show a probable drought event (many plans set this at about three to six months). The CERF's role should be in the secondary stages of planned early action, when a high-probability forecast indicates that humanitarian needs will increase significantly. The exact timeframe will depend significantly on the context, but should be designed to meet needs at the onset of an exceptionally challenging lean season compounded by the impacts of the drought. CERF-supported early action may finance agricultural or pastoral livelihood interventions, or enable

social protection systems to disburse funds to vulnerable households.

- For rapid-onset events, the short timeframes for decision-making (between three and ten days for floods or storms, depending on the skill of the forecast) may not be sufficient lead time for targeting and delivering support in advance at scale. Furthermore, there is still no strong body of evidence indicating what actions are more valuable when delivered in advance of a crisis, rather than afterwards. In the absence of more time and better data, the CERF should consider 'early action' as a means to use forecast information to jump-start a rapid humanitarian response and enable advanced humanitarian preparedness activities described in country-level APAs. Early-action SOPs, APAs or contingency plans can indicate when to begin stockpiling and pre-positioning supplies, and help prepare first responders to reduce the gap between when an event occurs and humanitarian aid arrives. This gap, when people lack adequate water, shelter, food and medical supplies, is when many of the secondary impacts of crisis occur; early action could reduce this suffering by ensuring a more rapid response and a better-equipped humanitarian community.

6.2 Ensure early action is predictable

Despite potential cost savings, RC/HCs and UN agencies are discouraged by the financial risks of acting early. The CERF can help foster predictability in funding and support UN agencies

⁶ IFRC is moving to impact-based modelling to implement early action at a national scale, but the model was still being developed and tested at the time of writing.

to take early action using their own contingency budgets, knowing that this will be repaid. The CERF's 'early start date' policy allows partners to immediately begin response activities and retroactively charge the CERF. If the CERF extends this to reimburse costs prior to the onset of the emergency, and validates costed EAPs, SOPs or response plans (see Section 7.4), organisations will have sufficient predictability to draw on their internal contingency budgets, in effect lending themselves enough money to cover early action costs prior to an emergency.

6.3 Promote contingency planning through the ERP and PPRE approach

For interagency collaboration on early action, a platform is needed to enable collective decision-making based on risk and pre-agreed triggers. One such platform is the Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) approach, developed by the IASC to optimise the speed and volume of critical humanitarian assistance. Like early action plans, the ERP focuses on operational delivery; WFP, UNHCR, WHO, FAO, UNICEF and others have adapted their internal guidance to reflect the ERP approach (IASC, n.d.). Similarly, for emergencies that are expected to cause significant displacement, UNHCR's parallel PPRE approach can facilitate coordinated early action. At the country level, the ERP and PPRE approaches are designed to be inclusive of major players in emergency response.

A benefit of building on the ERP approach to promote early action is that it works in progressive phases to prepare for emergencies: the 'minimum preparedness actions' (MPA) and 'advanced preparedness actions' (APA).⁷ For emergencies related to displacement, UNHCR's PPRE advocates for scenario-based contingency planning using the same approach as the ERP, with corresponding MPAs and APAs but led by the UNHCR Representative in-country. As part of the APA process, the UNHCT is expected to develop contingency plans for specific risks. These plans are, in principle, linked to risk monitoring. Early action could be incorporated

into these by expanding country contingency plans to include specific triggers for early action, based on seasonal and sub-seasonal forecasts. Triggers could be tied to a set of suggested early action interventions and 'advanced humanitarian readiness' actions, such as sourcing and procuring relief stocks, ensuring administrative and staffing needs are met and assessing infrastructural and sectoral capacities.

By making early action an integral part of existing contingency plans, preparedness actions are transformed into a sequenced chain, rather than an amorphous set of activities that fall somewhere between humanitarian and development work, as is often the case currently. Some preparedness actions can be taken in the early stages of an SOP using core budgets, such as registering beneficiaries for cash disbursements, while those that are taken in response to specific triggers and that have short lead times, such as pre-positioning or delivering supplies based on forecasts, can be integrated into later stages and deployed using CERF funding or internal agency contingency funds.

6.4 Validate and cost contingency plans

Contingency planning is a way of establishing and communicating anticipated funding requirements (UNHCR, 2015). Assigning budget estimates to contingency plans (elaborated as part of the APA process) or early action SOPs in high-risk situations would give the CERF secretariat a much more accurate picture of potential annual funding requirements.

One example to draw on is the contingency planning model adopted by the ARC. Countries submit an operations plan that explains how they would use funds in the event of a payout, and when a payout is likely (defined as a greater than 70% certainty within 70 days), countries submit a final implementation plan (Africa Risk Capacity, 2015). Similarly, the CERF could validate plans, reducing time in-country later on discussing triggers and elaborating requests for funding.

⁷ The ERP does not cover refugee-related emergencies or pandemics. UNHCR has developed a Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies, and International Health Regulations from WHO are used to guide responses to epidemics.

Plans will need to be costed, with some signals from the CERF about the level of finance it could provide for early action, and for what actions. Post-allocation, the CERF could publish the rationale for funding early action

applications (or not), to clarify expectations for other UNCTs looking to implement early action and provide models for how to design responses that leverage CERF funding and internal contingency budgets.

7 Recommendations for other stakeholders

7.1 Institutionalise early action at the RC/HC and HCT/UNCT level

Enabling and encouraging early action requires strong leadership. The RC system is in the midst of reform, offering an opportunity to better institutionalise accountability for early action. Current reforms focus on separating the RC's functions from those of the UNDP Resident Representative and transferring them to the UN Secretariat. As part of this effort, the UN has developed new job descriptions for RC/HCs and accountability frameworks between RC/HCs and UN Country Teams. This is an opportunity to reinforce the importance of the RC/HC role, not only in developing contingency plans, but also encouraging early action to crises. Convening meetings to determine triggers and revise national SOPs or contingency plans should be included within the terms of reference for the RC/HC's role.

7.2 Integrate early action into ERP and PPRE approaches

If early action is to enable better collaboration between agencies, a protocol or structure at the national HCT/UNCT level is necessary to enable collective decision-making based on risk and pre-agreed triggers. The ERP/PPRE approach provides such a platform (see Section 7.4), but to date is not sufficiently developed to function as a coordination platform for early action across all countries with a UN presence. RC/HCs and UN agencies should focus efforts on supporting and integrating early action into the ERP/PPRE approaches to ensure that risk information management, coordination, analysis and planning are suited to act prior to crises.

7.3 Commit internal contingency funding to support early action

Assuming that the CERF allows early action interventions to be backdated and retroactively reimbursed (an adapted version of what it currently allows for rapid response allocations), UN agencies should commit internal contingency funding for early action and advanced humanitarian readiness actions. By planning mutually-agreed early actions and costing these plans in high-risk locations, UN agencies can commit internal funds to early action with the knowledge that the CERF will reimburse them when an early action allocation is made through the rapid response window. Using internal contingency finance to coordinate with other sectors will allow agencies to invest in actions that greatly reduce the gap between the onset of a crisis and the arrival of aid.

7.4 Document and guide best practice for early action

UN agencies can strengthen national-level planning by creating a bank of 'best practice' sector-specific early actions for different types of crises. In existing pilots, determining the right type and sequence of early actions takes a fair amount of trial and error. The design of early action plans and testing of different approaches through HCTs/UNCTs should be shored up with support from HQ. Support from HQ to regional or country level will also facilitate learning between contexts and help expand the evidence base for early action.

7.5 Use early action to encourage localisation of aid

Interviewees mentioned that working in advance of emergencies was an opportunity to further the localisation of aid, as it would allow for more time to build relationships with and the capacities of partners. As part of SOPs and contingency plans, agencies can establish MOUs with pre-identified responders and agree on sub-grants for specific actions. In many cases, local responders are better positioned for early response and access as they are embedded within their communities, but need access to funding and expertise in advance of emergencies.

7.6 Invest in both preparedness and early action initiatives

A common refrain across discussions with RC/HCs and UN agencies was that preparedness is seriously underfunded by donors. What initiatives exist fall far below the scale of need. Insufficient investment in preparedness, disaster risk reduction and prevention undermines the efficacy of early action. Donors should continue to fund preparedness initiatives at the UN agency and national level, as well as financing early action initiatives bilaterally, or through existing mechanisms such as the Start Fund or the IFRC's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF).

7.7 Build the evidence base for early action

The evidence base for early action is still nascent. Alongside the UN's internal learning on best practice, early action funded by the CERF should be accompanied by rigorous research to better understand both the outcomes and the process of undertaking early action. Research should investigate which actions provide more benefits when delivered prior to the onset of an emergency, as opposed to in the aftermath, and whether the CERF secretariat's current procedures are appropriate to funding early action. At the national level, HCTs/UNCTs and host governments must revisit thresholds and sources of data used for crisis anticipation to determine the indicators and thresholds that are most appropriate for triggering early actions.

Other lines of inquiry for a future study to develop anticipatory action by the CERF include:

- How does CERF funding complement and further ongoing early action efforts?
- What kinds of early action are possible in protracted crises already characterised by high levels of unmet humanitarian needs?
- What other financial instruments may be appropriate for early action?
- How can phased early actions be sequenced between development and humanitarian actors?
- What flexibility is required in funding early action to account for inherent uncertainties?
- What information is necessary, and what interventions are most appropriate, for early action for conflict and displacement?

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