



Assessing Early Action Implementation by Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies

Desk Review and Qualitative Research Study by the IFRC-DREF and American Red Cross

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FINAL

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Executive Summary

In 2015, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement first started piloting forecast-based financing interventions, where pre-arranged financing was tied to pre-defined forecast threshold that triggered action ahead of a hazardous event. Building on these early experiences by Red Cross Red Crescent national societies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)' Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF) established an Anticipatory Pillar in 2018 to fund prepositioning of stock and annual readiness activities, and to ensure the quick and reliable release of funds to implement early actions once a trigger is reached, for National Societies that had developed and approved an early action protocol (EAP).

By 2023, 43 National Societies were engaged in anticipatory action planning and the Anticipatory Pillar of the DREF had funded 33 EAPs in 22 National Societies around the world for different hazards. Of those, 14 EAPs had been activated and implemented as of early 2023. At that time, IFRC commissioned this study, which was supported by the American Red Cross, to learn from the 14 activations to date, and to improve the EAPs as an anticipatory action mechanism going forward.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Assess to what extent the activated EAPs have been implemented as initially designed. If not, identify the challenges. If so, identify the enablers.
- Provide an overview of each EAP to determine if the early actions conducted achieved their intended objective and coverage. In addition, provide an analysis of aggregate achievements, challenges and learnings across all activations to understand if there are recurring trends.
- Provide an analysis of the effectiveness of the current methodology used to develop EAPs for the implementation of early actions and provide recommendations for how that methodology could be strengthened.

To what extent were National Societies organizationally and operationally ready to activate EAPs?

The study finds that the EAP development process in many ways helped National Societies enhance their organizational and operational readiness to activate EAPs, especially with regards to capacity strengthening, stakeholder engagement and establishing collaboration with partners – including with Red Cross Red Crescent institutions, government entities, UN organizations and at-risk communities.

Overall, National Societies judged their collaboration with external partners as conducive to an effective EAP development and implementation, but there are cases where the activations revealed a need for broader engagement, e.g. with communities or with sectoral agencies and experts. Further, in some cases, stakeholder collaborations were not maintained throughout the EAPs' lifecycles, but activations helped deepen, revive and formalize them. In sum, experiences with stakeholder engagement in the EAP development process and subsequent activation highlight the importance of involving key actors through continuous co-creating and joint ownership of the EAP, rather than through a one-way relationship of passing information from provider to user.

Awareness raising, training and simulation exercises implemented during EAP development strengthened the readiness of National Societies to activate EAPs, but there were still specific gaps in the capacity of some National Societies that complicated the EAP development process. Gaps that several interviewees highlighted concerned, in particular, technical capacity in forecasting and definition of appropriate triggers. Further, maintaining awareness and technical capacity within the organization over time presented a challenge to some National Societies, though in part this could be addressed through readiness activities and budgets that can be included within the EAPs themselves.

All but one of the 14 EAPs included budget for the National Societies to undertake readiness activities on an annual basis. The share of readiness and pre-positioning budget as part of the total EAP budget varied widely between

EAPs: four EAPs did not including any pre-positioning budget (three of them being EAPs for slow-onset hazards). The average share of readiness and prepositioning of the total EAP budget was 41% (the remainder being budget allocated for early action activities).

In practice, not all National Societies had undertaken the readiness and prepositioning activities specified in their EAP at the time when the EAP was activated. These National Societies were therefore not as organizationally and operationally ready as had planned to be. This concerned at least four EAP activations, though confirming the extent to which prepositioning, and readiness activities had been conducted at the time of activation was very challenging, as there is no consistent reporting on their completion, so the number of concerned activations may actually be higher.

In three cases, the short time available between the EAP approval and its activation (zero to four months) meant that some readiness and prepositioning activities had not yet, or only just, been completed when the EAP was activated. The additional time it takes to sign agreement documents and transfer funds to National Societies, along with competing priorities within the National Societies, has meant that readiness and prepositioning in some cases were delayed, even where there should have technically been enough time to complete them between the time of approval and activation.

For over half of the activations, National Societies highlighted the usefulness of pre-stocking and general readiness activities for effective implementation during their EAP activations. It is difficult to establish across all activations, however, whether planning for more or different readiness and prepositioning activities would allow National Societies to activate their EAPs more effectively. This is because of how specific the capacities and interventions of each National Society are; and because there is limited information on the outcomes and impacts of many of the activations. Nonetheless, there are indications from monitoring, evaluation and learning conducted on a few of the activations that the readiness and pre-positioning components of specific EAPs may have been underutilized.

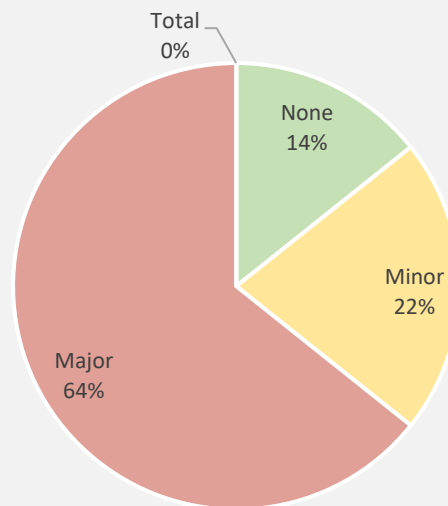
Larger countries with big or dispersed at-risk areas and limited road infrastructure particularly struggled with finding context-appropriate approaches to prepositioning under their EAPs, because on the one hand, it may be too costly or inefficient to preposition items in all at-risk regions, but on the other, transporting items from one region to another once a trigger is met can take longer than the lead time for cyclones or floods allow. Other major gaps in readiness and prepositioning included a lack of communication, discontinuities in the maintenance of kits and cash transfer cards and insufficient articulation and testing of finance and procurement processes specified in the EAPs.

To what extent did the activation and implementation of early actions go as planned?

The vast majority of activations did not go entirely as planned in the EAP, with deviations from the plan including differences between the intended objectives and what was achieved in terms of number of people covered and time required to implement activities for 12 of the 14 activations; changes in the early action activities in one case; and changes in the trigger in another case.

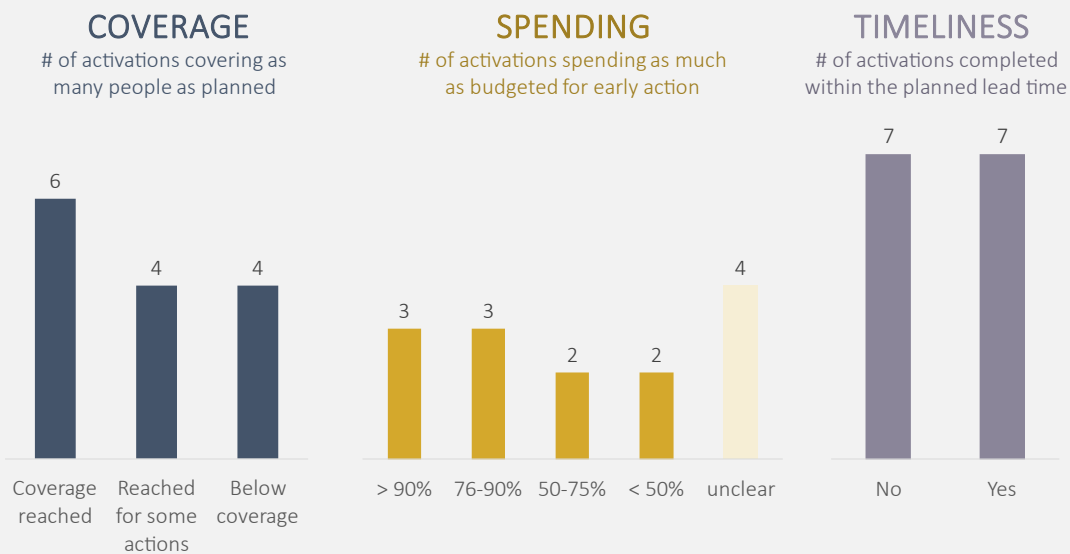
Over a third of the activations managed to implement their early action activities with no deviations or with only minor deviations from their intended objectives in terms of (1) reaching as many people as planned, (2) completing activities within the lead time and (3) spending the budget for early action activities. Activations were considered to have no deviation if these three benchmarks were all reached, and minor if all benchmarks were at least partially reached. The remaining nearly two thirds of activations experienced major deviations, meaning at least one benchmark was not reached.

Figure ES.1: Level of deviation from the activation's intended objective and coverage



Overall, six activations (43% of those reviewed) achieved the intended coverage stated in their EAP objectives and indicators in full or exceeded them. Only three of the ten activations for which early action expenditure could be confirmed from final reports ended up spending as much as initially budgeted for early actions or remained within 10% margin of the budget. Half of the 14 activations managed to complete all the planned early action activities entirely within the available lead time.

Figure ES.2: Coverage, spending and timeliness of reviewed EAP activations



The biggest challenges to effective EAP activation and implementation of early action activities were: (1) short lead times, which were short to start with and ended up being even shorter in practice for many activations targeting rapid-onset events, (2) procurement and financial transaction processes that were either not clear and formalized enough at the time of activation or that were outside of the EAP's control, and (3) changes in the operational context between the time of EAP development and activation, e.g. as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic or compounding hazardous events. Other issues included unclear roles and responsibilities and insufficient communication; inappropriate actions, delivery and targeting processes; and limitations in leadership and capacity of staff or volunteers.

The main enablers for effective activation and early action implementation were: (1) good coordination and established partnerships within the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and beyond, including with governments and development partners, (2) logistical and financial readiness, in particular ensuring rapid liquidity for activation, putting in place supplier agreements, pre-positioning stock, and conducting training and simulation exercises, and (3) the strengths of the National Society staff and volunteer networks with regards to their skills and dedication. Other enablers included having some flexibility to adapt to changing contexts; community participation; selection of appropriate early actions and delivery mechanisms; and learning from previous activations.

Was the monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) plan implemented as planned?

All reviewed EAPs include output and outcome indicators and the final activation reports document achievements against these indicators. Reporting is usually at the level of outputs or short-term outcomes, with number of people covered by different early action activities being the standard indicator used in every EAP. Each of the 14 activations included in this study was followed by a lesson learned workshop, which National Societies usually held within a few months after the activation.

The extent to which National Societies pursued additional MEAL activities varied widely, as did the quality of MEAL outputs. The biggest barriers to effective implementation of planned MEAL activities for the 14 activations were restrictions on movement and precautionary measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, coinciding emergency response operations for other events, and limited availability of competent local MEAL service providers at the short notice that EAP MEAL requires.

While key informants acknowledged the importance of MEAL to continuously improve the quality of EAPs and, ultimately, the effectiveness of EAP implementation, and in some cases were confident that lessons learned are already informing revisions, there is currently no standard process to ensure or formally track the translation of MEAL findings into new or revised EAPs.

How effective is the currently EAP methodology for the implementation of early action activities?

Beyond the challenges National Societies faced during EAP activations, and enablers that supported them in implementing their EAPs (discussed in Chapters 3.3 and 3.4 above), the 14 activations reviewed for this study shed light on several broader issues that National Societies and the IFRC need to be – and are already – considering with regards to the effectiveness of the EAP methodology:

Timelines for EAP review, validation and revalidation processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The time it takes to get EAPs validated, and to have them revalidated once they have been revised after an activation, remains a major topic of contention. The existing timelines for revalidation of EAPs are not fit for purpose to ensure EAPs are up and running again for the hazard season that follows an EAP activation Respondents outlined several reasons for the lengthy review, approval and revalidation processes, including perception of the validation as lengthy, overly meticulous and overwhelming for some National Societies, competing priorities, limited resources and technical capacity in the National Society, and disagreement about appropriate trigger levels and the purpose of the EAP more broadly.
Frequency of activation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The current guidelines specify that EAPs should aim to trigger for one-in-five year events, but the activations show that this is not universally achieved. In a few instances, National Societies thought that the trigger had been set too high and expressed a desire to activate for events with lower magnitude, which can already cause significant damage, albeit locally or for a smaller number of people. Generally, most key informants agreed with the notion that EAPs should kick-in for events of a certain magnitude that can cause severe impacts and would likely require a humanitarian response. This level of impact could be more or less frequent than a one-in-five year event, depending on hazard and exposure context.
Compounding and back-to-back events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was relatively common for EAP activations to occur within the context of pre-existing shocks or stresses, but there is currently no strategic approach for how to deal with such situations of compounding or back-to-back events in EAPs.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Countries that have several detailed and pre-approved plans for different hazards when, in reality, events can coincide and in practice require a response addressing several hazards also require better alignment between plans.
Scalability of actions and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over time, the requirements for coverage of an EAP have increased and National Societies now need to cover at least 10,000 people per activation. However, some activities that were implemented as part of past activations may not be feasible, or at least not in the same way, at that scale, or at an even larger scale if National Societies want to increase their coverage between the 10,000 people threshold; thus, requiring EAPs to adapt as they increase in coverage. Looking only at aggregate number of people covered as a key success indicator can undervalue or disincentive certain actions that may be relatively more labour intensive or costly to provide but can have big impacts for beneficiaries. Understanding outcomes and impacts and considering them in addition to immediate short-term outputs is important to ensure early actions are effective.
Balancing rigidity and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding the right balance between rigid processes and detailed planning that aims at supporting efficiency and accountability, and flexibility to be able to react to changing circumstances is a major challenge for the EAP process. In practice, it was often possible to make ad hoc adjustments to react to changes in the operational context during the activations, but overall, the EAP processes provide limited flexibility to adapt EAPs to changing circumstances without going through full validation processes. Lighter EAPs with more managerial decision-making responsibility, e.g. through the DREF Appeal Manager in Geneva or the DREF Project Managers at the Delegation level, could help address this.
Institutionalization and mainstreaming in National Societies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In many cases, even where EAP activations have gone well and (largely) achieved their intended objectives, there was a general sentiment that the next necessary step for effective early action was institutionalizing and mainstreaming early action within the National Societies wider operations and risk management cycles. Some National Societies, regional and global IFRC entities, are also exploring ways in which early action can be better institutionalized within government processes and programs, but this is in the early stages in most countries.
Funding for EAP development and maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The development of the EAPs included in this review was primarily funded jointly through National Societies and their Partner National Societies. Related to existing levels of capacity of National Society and partners and other contextual factors such as country size and available logistics and financial infrastructure, the length and cost of the EAP development process also varied, usually taking around one to two years and ranging between CHF 50,000 and CHF 500,000 (not including additional multi-year FbF system strengthening projects). The IFRC is piloting the development of EAPs in some target countries, but views about whether it is the role of the IFRC, and the IFRC-DREF in particular, to provide upfront funding for EAP development in the future are still divided. Total costs of the EAP methodology are not systematically captured, making it impossible to assess the true cost-effectiveness of the EAP approach – in absolute terms and in comparison, to spending the same amount of money through the DREF for imminent events or the DREF for response mechanisms.

Recommendations for strengthening the EAP methodology

Based on these findings, this study puts forward the following recommendations to the IFRC for strengthening the EAP methodology going forward

Flexibility within EAPs:

1. Include in EAPs and accompanying standard operating procedures considerations and scenarios for how to manage EAP activations in complex emergencies, in cases where implementation of early action activities may be constrained by coinciding events.
2. Increase the flexibility for National Societies to reactivate the EAP several times throughout the course of its 5-year implementation period, including more than once within a season.

3. Ensure learning and improvement of protocols can take place based on activations within the 5-year lifecycle of an EAP without requiring a full revalidation process.
4. Explore options that would allow for greater flexibility in the trigger for EAP activation as part of the standard EAP guidelines and templates.

Efficiency of EAP-related processes:

5. Identify and operationalize the most feasible and financially efficient approach to pre-finance early action activities to ensure immediate liquidity as and when required by the National Society following an activation.
6. Increase capacity of the Validation Committee to enable involvement of IFRC delegations and the Validation Committee continuously throughout the EAP development process, rather than only ex post during the review and validation period.

MEAL and strategic alignment of EAPs:

7. Share lessons learned from activations to date with National Societies, to enable cross-country learning from experiences across the RCRC.
8. Invest more systematically in monitoring costs and analysing the outcomes and impacts of EAP activations and assess the cost-effectiveness of EAPs compared to imminent DREF and DREF response options for the emergency fund.
9. Reconsider the way in which simplified EAPs, full EAPs and other DREF mechanisms – such as imminent DREF and DREF response – are promoted to National Societies, and how they can align and work together within a country to cover different layers of risks for different hazards.

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