

OPERATIONAL REVIEW: IFRC-DREF RESPONSE TO THE 2023–2024 FLOODS IN SRI LANKA



Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) Branch Disaster Response Team (BDRT) evacuates residents to safer shelters and distributes clean drinking water in the Rathnapura district. (Photo: SLRCS)

REVIEW REPORT

Prepared by:

Nenad Matejic

IFRC-DREF Accountability and Compliance Senior Officer

and

Mark McCaul

Project Manager, Canadian Red Cross

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Address: Chemin des Crêts 17, Petit-Saconnex, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland Postal address: P.O. Box 303, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland. **T** +41 (0)22 730 42 22 | **F** +41 (0)22 730 42 00 | **E** secretariat@ifrc.org | **W** [ifrc.org](https://www.ifrc.org)

Executive Summary

Commissioned by the IFRC-DREF Coordination Team, this operational review examines three Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) flood response operations supported by IFRC-DREF between 2023 and 2024. The review assesses their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and contributions to longer-term preparedness and Anticipatory Action (AA).

Conducted between August and December 2025, the review draws on extensive desk analysis, field interviews across multiple districts, and surveys with SLRCS staff, volunteers, community members, government counterparts, and Movement partners. Participants included National Society staff involved in the reviewed operations, community members, and staff from the Asia-Pacific Regional Office (APRO) and the Cluster Delegation for India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Maldives. The findings are primarily intended for the IFRC-DREF Team, Operations Coordination Teams, the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Office and Cluster Delegation, with the aim of strengthening the development and implementation of DREF operations as well to understand the limitations of expanding Anticipatory Action plans under IFRC-DREF across the country.

The review found that all three flood operations were **highly relevant** to the needs of flood-affected communities, with responses combining multipurpose cash assistance, health services, WASH interventions, shelter repair, school support and, in the most recent operation, livelihoods support and enhanced epidemic/dengue control. Appropriateness was generally rated “excellent” or “good” by staff, volunteers, authorities and female community members, though male community members and women in large households pointed to persistent shelter and sanitation gaps, flat cash transfer values and unmet structural mitigation needs such as drainage and canal works.

CEA was a major strength across all operations. SLRCS and IFRC applied a range of tools (community meetings, household visits, disaggregated data collection, hotlines, social media, door-to-door outreach and formal complaints mechanisms) to inform populations, clarify selection criteria and gather feedback. These feedback loops directly shaped programmatic choices, including the adjustment of cash amounts to reflect inflation and household size, modifications to delivery methods in remote areas, and updates to SOPs and distribution planning. Nevertheless, a gendered participation gap emerged: while most KII respondents felt communities influenced adjustments, women across groups reported that their engagement remained insufficient, suggesting that general CEA systems need to be complemented by specific measures to strengthen women’s voice in decisions.

In terms of **efficiency and effectiveness**, the three operations were characterised by rapid mobilisation (often beginning before DREF approval), strong budget execution and the achievement or surpassing of most KPIs, especially in WASH, health, cash and overall people reached. However, shortfalls were observed in some medical camps/first aid activities, CVA for refugees and volunteer mobilization targets, mainly due to external approvals, overlapping assistance from other actors, and logistical constraints. The MDRLK018 operation required a significant extension (to nine months) and a more than doubled budget, underscoring that the standard three-to-four-month DREF timeframe was insufficient for complex, multisector flood responses in this context. Recurrent bottlenecks included procurement delays (e.g. mosquito nets), tax exemptions, health department approvals, elections, non-digital beneficiary data and branch-level finance/logistics limitations.

Coordination emerged as a systemic strength. The operations were firmly anchored within national structures – Disaster Management Centre (DMC), District and Divisional Secretariats, Ministry of Health (MoH), National Water Board, Irrigation Department, National Building Research Organization (NBRO) and Tri-forces (Army, Navy, Airforce) - with SLRCS playing a central role in Cash and WASH Technical Working Groups (TWGs) and leveraged complementary support from UN and NGO partners. This resulted in harmonised cash grant design using the Minimum Expenditure Basket and reduced duplication in relief distribution. At the same time, the operations produced **tangible positive impacts** on household wellbeing (food security, safe water, health, safety, education

continuity) and built institutional capacities in assessments, first aid, warehouse management, CVA, CEA, MHPSS communication and coordination.

However, the review found **limited formalization of links to longer-term recovery, DRR and AA**. No explicit exit strategies were documented, the sustainability of PGI and health initiatives beyond the response was unclear, and DRR elements such as community risk assessments and contingency planning were not systematically integrated. In parallel, SLRCS has made strong advances in AA (integrating AA into its strategic plan, establishing an AA TWG, validating a dengue sEAP and drafting flood AA SOPs) with sustained IFRC support. Yet, significant technical, financial and institutional barriers still prevent a fully operational nationwide flood Early Action Protocol, and no DREF AA flood activation has yet occurred. The overall conclusion is that while DREF remains an effective tool for rapid flood response, **it is only partially adequate on its own** for recurring, predictable flood risks in Sri Lanka and must be complemented by sustained preparedness and anticipatory investments.

THE AUTHORS

- **Review Co-Leads:** Nenad Matejic (*IFRC-DREF Accountability and Compliance Senior Officer*) and Mark McCaul (*Project Manager, Canadian Red Cross*)
- **Supporting Members:** Wartini Pramana (*Evaluation Manager, Canadian Red Cross*); Alina Atemnkeng (*Senior Officer, IFRC-DREF*)

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Background

The SLRCS has been an active user of IFRC-DREF funding for the past several years, receiving financial support to respond to a range of hazards including floods, drought, epidemics, population movement, and civil unrest. However, most IFRC-DREF allocations to Sri Lanka RC have focused on flood response - both in terms of the number of operations and the total amount of funding - with funding primarily allocated from the Response Pillar (please refer to Table 1 below for further details).

Sri Lanka is prone to seasonal flooding, particularly during the monsoon periods. These floods frequently cause widespread displacement, loss of livelihoods, and damage to infrastructure, particularly in vulnerable districts. In response, SLRCS with support from IFRC-DREF, has implemented multiple flood operations aimed at meeting urgent humanitarian needs through interventions such as multipurpose cash assistance, provision of emergency shelter materials, and access to safe water and hygiene supplies. While these responses have provided vital support to disaster-affected populations, it is important to assess the operations in light of the changing risk landscape and increasing emphasis on locally-led and anticipatory approaches.

IFRC-DREF was expanded to include an Anticipatory Pillar, enabling Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies to take early action based on forecast-based triggers. Despite Sri Lanka's exposure to predictable flood risks and existing early warning systems, SLRCS has not yet requested IFRC-DREF funding for floods under the Anticipatory Pillar.¹ However, at the time of commencement of this operational review, the National Society had started data collection for the development of the first Simplified EAP (sEAP) for floods. The findings of this review have the aim to contribute to the strengthening of the development and implementation of this first sEAP for floods from this National Society.

Table 1. Overview of funding provided to SLRCS from IFRC-DREF

Overview of IFRC-DREF Funding to SLRCS from 2009 to 2025		
# of allocations and amount from IFRC-DREF to SLRCS	26	CHF 7,846,395
# of grants and amount	21	CHF 6,382,448
# of loans and amount	5	CHF 1,463,947
# of allocations and amount for floods	15	CHF 4,378,106
# of allocations and amount from Response Pillar	25	CHF 7,626,396
# of allocations and amount from Anticipatory Pillar	1	CHF 219,999

Purpose of the Review

The IFRC-DREF Operational Review aims to collect important insight from the SLRCS's responses to repeated floods in 2023–2024. Its goal has been to understand how these interventions were carried out and identify lessons that can help improve future anticipatory actions. As the National Society has started developing its first Simplified sEAP for floods, this review aims to offer support to the strengthening of the sEAP's creation and its implementation.

¹ An sEAP for Dengue was approved at the beginning of June 2025 in the amount of CHF 219,999.

Scope

This review analysed three recent IFRC-DREF flood operations in Sri Lanka (see Table 2).

Table 2. IFRC-DREF operations covered by the operational review

Appeal ID	Disaster Name	Crisis Categorization	Total (CHF)	Start Date	End Date	Timeframe
MDRLK018	Sri Lanka - Floods	Orange	798,854	19-10-2023	31-07-2024	9 months
MDRLK019	Sri Lanka - Monsoon Flood	Yellow	491,993	20-06-2024	31-10-2024	4 months
MDRLK020	Sri Lanka Inter-Monsoon Flood 2024	Yellow	309,662	24-10-2024	28-02-2025	4 months

Methodology

The methodology for the IFRC-DREF Operational Review consisted of the following components:

- **Desk review of secondary data:** Data sources included planning and reporting documents such as the IFRC-DREF operations applications, associated budgets, operational updates (where relevant), final reports, and Lessons Learned Workshop reports.
- **Field Visit and Key Informant Interviews:** To complement the information retrieved from the secondary data review, a field visit to Sri Lanka was conducted by the operational review team from 20 to 24 October 2025. With the coordination of SLRCS, the operational review team had the opportunity to conduct interviews with SLRCS staff members, including branch staff members and volunteers as well as community members. The key informant interviews included the participation of the following: volunteers (4 females and 3 males), branch staff (4 males) community members (10 females and 3 males) and partner/external organisations (10 females and 3 males). To further complement the insights obtained from the interviews during the field visit, surveys and questions were also sent out to an additional 4 persons (SLRCS staff and management and IFRC staff - 3 males and 1 female).
- The review team employed the support of AI to facilitate the desk review and data analysis of the surveys as well as the copy-editing of this report.



Photo: Operational Review Team visiting the Divisional Secretariat in Lahugala

Limitations

Scope and Sampling

Small, non-probability sample: The sample size and purposive selection may limit statistical representativeness; findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than generalizable across all affected populations, branches, or IFRC-DREF floods operations in Sri Lanka.

- **Time constraints:** Short fieldwork limited the depth of inquiry, opportunities for follow-up questions, and the ability to observe program activities across different times or contexts.

Data Collection and Bias Risks

- **Interpreter mediated KIIs:** Reliance on Red Cross/Branch staff as interpreters introduces risks of translation loss, framing effects, and courtesy bias; in such circumstances, staff may unintentionally filter or soften critical feedback, and participants may adjust responses knowing staff are present.
- **Recall bias (2023–2024 operations):** Retrospective accounts are vulnerable to memory decay and post event rationalization; specific timelines and details may be imprecise.
- **Terminology:** KII respondents provided ratings without reference to the internationally recognized definition of “appropriateness.” Because their assessments were based on individual interpretations rather than a shared standard, the resulting data lack comparability and conceptual consistency. This makes it difficult to determine whether high or low ratings reflect actual alignment with globally accepted criteria—such as relevance to needs, cultural acceptability, timeliness, or feasibility—or simply personal perceptions shaped by local experience. As a result, the ratings cannot be reliably used to draw conclusions about the true appropriateness of the intervention, limiting the strength and validity of any aggregated analysis.

Combined Indicator / Double-Barrelled Question in KII

The KIIs followed the IFRC-DREF Operational Reviews Standard Questionnaire, which used a single question to assess both appropriateness and timeliness. This made interpretation challenging. For instance, one respondent rated the assistance “excellent” but noted that “the cash was most appropriate even though it came a month later.” Feedback on improvements, good practices, and challenges included very few comments on timeliness, with only two respondents citing it as an area for improvement. Consequently, responses to this combined criterion were interpreted mainly as perceptions of appropriateness.

Key Findings/Observations

Relevance & Appropriateness

Alignment of Interventions with Community Needs

Across the three flood operations, the combination of shared and operation-specific activities indicates that interventions were context-sensitive and aligned with the priority needs identified in health, WASH, shelter, and more distinctly in one operation, livelihoods. Health assessments consistently pointed to limited access to care; each operation deployed medical camps and first aid, while MDRLK020 operation added enhanced epidemic control and community surveillance, and MDRLK018 operation complemented service delivery with cash for health expenditures. In WASH, all operations tackled contaminated water sources through well cleaning, water distribution, and hygiene promotion, including dengue awareness; however, respondents noted that sanitation needs such as temporary toilets and emergency bottled water were not fully met in some areas. For shelter, MDRLK019 and MDRLK020 operations provided household items and support for repairs, with MDRLK020 operation also offering cash for shelter; both also distributed school packs. Distinctively, MDRLK020 operation expanded into livelihoods and basic needs through cash grants, dry rations, and livelihood support, reflecting an effort to stabilize household consumption and recovery.

Perceptions of Appropriateness

Perceptions were broadly positive among branch staff, volunteers, national authorities, and many women community members, who tended to rate appropriateness as “excellent” or “good,” pointing to timely cash and effective coordination. Some men in the community expressed more ambivalent views (“average” or “poor”) often tied to unmet shelter needs and pressures on larger households. Community testimony captures both the benefits and limitations of cash in flood responses: “Cash grant support was timely and good, used for medicine, food needs, education,” one woman reported, while another observed that “receiving money was positive,” yet it could not resolve sanitation challenges. Staff and volunteers often described performance through rapid cash distribution and coordination (qualities frequently associated with effectiveness) whereas many community members assessed appropriateness more directly against persisting needs, such as roof repairs or the higher costs faced by big families.

“Cash grant support was timely and good, used for medicine, food needs, education.” (Female community member)

“Receiving money was positive. Negative is that the cash cannot be used for solving sanitation situation.” (Female community member)

Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI) in Design and Targeting

Most respondent groups, regardless of gender, confirmed that PGI considerations were applied, citing clear eligibility criteria and an emphasis on inclusivity. At the same time, female volunteers and other informants highlighted ongoing access barriers for female-headed households, older people, and persons with disabilities, including gaps in identity documentation, Sinhala/Tamil language hurdles, and difficulties opening bank accounts. These constraints sometimes led to delays or exclusion for those most at risk. Several respondents also stressed that equal cash amounts did not reflect unequal needs (e.g., larger households, people with disabilities) and that

transfer values were eroded by inflation. As one woman put it, “Large households received same amount as smaller households, not enough for basic food.”

“Large households received same amount as smaller households, not enough for basic food.” (Female community member)

“Shelter repair would be useful (repair roof of house).” (Male community member)

“Canal cleaning and canal deepening would help in mitigating the water flow.” (Male community member)



Photo: KIIs conducted during the field visit

Effectiveness of Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) for Needs Identification and Feedback

CEA processes were central to identifying needs and steering adaptations across the operations, though capacity constraints were noted. In the MDRLK018 operation, needs were captured through community consultations and household visits, supported by sex-, age-, and disability-disaggregated data to strengthen inclusion and targeting; feedback contributed to adjustments in cash modalities and refinements to SOPs, even as limited volunteer communication skills and literacy initially affected data accuracy. MDRLK019 operation coupled community meetings and market assessments with proactive communication on selection criteria; a 24/7 hotline enabled real-time feedback that led to revisions of cash amounts (to track inflation) and adaptations to delivery methods for remote areas or inactive bank accounts. In the MDRLK020 operation, branch-level awareness sessions and continuous district assessments helped identify vulnerable displaced families and informed activity reallocations; however, the sheer number of people in need relative to resources lengthened beneficiary identification and exposed gaps in producing communication materials.

Transparency and Information for Affected Populations

All three operations emphasized transparency and two-way information flows. Teams publicized selection criteria, ran awareness campaigns, and used multiple channels—social media, hotlines, and face-to-face meetings—to minimize misinformation and build trust. Interviewees generally considered feedback mechanisms accessible and safe, with volunteers and staff seen as approachable. Monitoring and supervision included weekly branch visits or calls, monthly HQ/IFRC follow-ups, door-to-door engagement, focus group discussions, and beneficiary satisfaction surveys, contributing to a steady flow of operational intelligence that supported timely course correction.

Participation in Decision-Making and Operational Adaptation

Affected people were engaged through consultations, household interactions, structured awareness sessions, and complaint and grievance channels that were designed from the outset. In the MDRLK018 operation, volunteer-led consultations, disaggregated targeting data, and a clear complaints framework helped communities act as informed participants; their input sharpened selection criteria, improved distribution planning and visibility, and supported adjustments to cash modalities and SOPs/manuals. MDRLK019 operation sustained dialogue via

community meetings and traditional/social media, while the hotline enabled rapid issue resolution; post-distribution monitoring captured strong urban engagement, and feedback directly influenced assistance levels and delivery approaches, guiding spending priorities for food, medical, and education needs. In the MDRLK020 operation, awareness sessions on disaster response and financial procedures, combined with branch presentations and group work, deepened community understanding and underpinned reallocation decisions; recommendations to publicly post beneficiary lists aimed to strengthen social accountability and reduce tensions around targeting.

*“During implementation, orientation and their ideas and knowledge is collected, they know who was affected.”
(Female community member)*

“We receive messages from community members, and in the DM committee the community members are also involved.” (Male governmental representative)

Gender Dynamics in Engagement

While 75% of KII respondents (including branch staff, volunteers, community members, and national authorities) stated that affected people were involved in decision-making and helped adjust operations, women across respondent groups consistently felt engagement was insufficient, pointing to a gender participation gap. The findings suggest establishing women-only consultation spaces and enabling female-led focus groups in target locations to ensure that women’s perspectives more directly shape operational choices and adaptations. Overall, participants considered responses to be well adapted through community discussions, ongoing assessments, and monitoring visits; volunteers of all genders highlighted the value of focus groups and feedback systems, national authorities emphasized WhatsApp information sharing and early warning systems, and women community members underscored the importance of community discussions, leadership reports, and in-depth assessments.

Efficiency

Speed of Mobilization and Timeliness of Delivery

Across the three operations, the National Society mobilized rapidly—often commencing initial response activities even before the IFRC-DREF request—then maintained momentum to deliver core services within the planned operational windows. Timeliness was a recurring strength, with swift service launch and overall completion against schedules; where isolated delays emerged (for instance, in mosquito-net procurement or branch-level finance processing), they were actively managed and did not materially compromise results. Targets set for key sectors such as WASH, Health, and cash assistance, were reported as met or exceeded, underscoring a strong linkage between early mobilization and on-time delivery.

Financial Management, Budget Execution, and Reallocations

Financial stewardship was characterized by prudent and efficient budget execution, high utilization rates, and purposeful reallocations toward higher-value activities when savings were identified. Operations avoided duplication, returned small underspends to the DREF, and demonstrated robust cash-assistance performance supported by consistent monitoring. This pattern suggests disciplined financial controls combined with enough flexibility to optimize the use of funds as needs and operational realities evolved.

Human Resources and Operational Coverage

Human resource mobilization was effective and adaptive. The rapid expansion of volunteer support, paired with increased monitoring presence, improved delivery speed and extended coverage, even as some branches initially faced local capacity constraints. As surge needs stabilized, these human resource investments translated into smoother field execution, better oversight, and an overall reduction in processing bottlenecks.

Cost-Effectiveness and Value for Money (Perceptions from KIIs)

Key informant interviews reflect broad confidence in value for money: most respondents rated cost-effectiveness as good or excellent. Notably, several male branch staff surfaced efficiency risks occurring at the point of assessment, especially when heads of households were absent, which triggered repeat follow-ups, and in cases where beneficiaries lacked identification or phone contacts, additional time and visits were required to finalize eligibility and delivery. These frictions did not overturn the overall positive judgement but point to predictable, people-level constraints that can be mitigated.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Systems

IFRC and SLRCS teams confirmed that M&E tools and learning processes were used effectively and that reporting was available across the operations. At the same time, they recommended improving the quality of monitoring-visit reports to sharpen analysis and actionability. SLRCS staff further suggested enhanced M&E training, tool updates, and earmarking additional funds for monitoring activities - signals of a learning culture that is functioning yet seeking higher standards of evidence and follow-through.

Bottlenecks, Workarounds, and Risk Management

The most prominent efficiency headwinds were discrete and operational: procurement delays (e.g., mosquito nets), branch-level finance bottlenecks, and remote banking access challenges that slowed cash delivery to some recipients. Mitigation actions—such as active vendor follow-up, additional branch support, and adaptive cash-delivery methods—were applied and reported to have limited the downstream impact on timelines and outputs. In effect, small-scale frictions were managed in stride without derailing sectoral results.

Overall Efficiency

Taken together, the operations presented a consistent picture of efficiency: rapid and largely on-schedule mobilization; disciplined, flexible financial management; effective human-resource deployment to extend reach; broadly positive value-for-money perceptions; and functioning M&E systems with clear ideas for further improvement. The isolated bottlenecks encountered were anticipated for a flood-response context and were addressed with mitigation measures that preserved intended results.

Effectiveness

Realism of Operational Strategy and KPI Targets

The overarching operational strategies and KPI targets were, on balance, realistic for the proposed timeframes and activity sets, as shown by targets being met or exceeded in most sectors. Where shortfalls appeared, they were largely linked to factors outside the teams' direct control—government approvals, overlaps with other actors, and optimistic assumptions about volunteer mobilization that were not fully built into initial KPI design. Adaptive management—through expansions, reallocations, and strengthened coordination—helped keep outcomes aligned with evolving operational realities.

Performance against KPIs by Operation

In the MDRLK018 operation, most key performance indicators surpassed targets across multi-purpose cash assistance, medical camps and first aid, WASH, and overall people reached. The exception was dry rations, where targets were only partially met due to overlap with other organizations' assistance (e.g., DMC and Save the Children). The operation ultimately required a five-month extension and a budget increase to more than double the original envelope, revealing that both time and funding needs were underestimated in the initial plan.

The MDRLK019 operation achieved the majority of its KPIs for multi-purpose cash assistance and essential household items and exceeded targets for WASH and total individuals assisted. Medical camps and first aid reached only about 30% of the intended population, with the primary causes being approval delays and logistics constraints. Despite these headwinds, the operation closed on schedule with an overall expenditure of 94%, indicating strong financial execution alongside selective under-delivery in one health component.

For the MDRLK020 operation, performance was similarly strong, with WASH meeting targets and multi-purpose cash, dengue control, PGI, and people reached exceeding expectations. Under-performance in medical camps/first aid and CVA for refugees reflected lower demand and logistical delays; funds were reallocated to bolster dengue control where needs rose. Migration support covered slightly fewer people than anticipated due to eligibility limitations. Volunteer mobilization also fell short (74 insured versus a target of 300), which constrained some outreach activities. The operation nonetheless finished on time and slightly under budget, utilizing 93% of available funds.

Adaptive Management and Course Correction

Across the portfolio, teams used extensions, budget revisions, and activity reallocations to offset approval delays, shifting health trends, and market or coordination dynamics. These adjustments—such as diverting funds from lower-uptake medical camps to dengue control or calibrating assistance where other actors were active—demonstrate that operational strategies remained living frameworks rather than fixed plans, sustaining effectiveness even as assumptions evolved.

Data Systems, Targeting, and Documentation

Beneficiary data quality and access issues repeatedly surfaced. The team faced difficulties obtaining government information (e.g., hospital data in Thawalama) and reconciling inconsistencies that, in Galle, led to reduced DREF allocations. The absence of a complete, reliable beneficiary database contributed to overlaps between cash-grant

and NFI recipient lists, while limited digitalization created lags in documenting and certifying cash assistance. These data frictions had a measurable effect on timeliness and the precision of targeting.

Logistics, Procurement, and Business Support Functions

Across operations, delays linked to business support functions were noted, including the need for additional logistical resources to reach remote areas and obstacles with mobilizing communities and equipment for well-cleaning programs. Lessons Learned reflections flagged medical procurement challenges, constrained warehouse and transport capacity, and the need for transparent supplier identification processes for well-cleaning. Together, these factors slowed some deliverables but also generated concrete improvement points for future flood responses.

Finance Flows, Branch Administration, and Human Resources

Institutional bottlenecks included delays in disbursing DREF funds to branches and the need for tighter expenditure management and monitoring in several locations. Some branches faced administrative limits due to constrained budgets, while human resource gaps included shortages of volunteers and staff (notably bookkeepers), insufficient equipment for finance and data management (such as laptops), and too few community mobilizers. These constraints affected speed and documentation but were partially offset by targeted support and process adaptations.

Governance, Planning, and Branch Participation

Effectiveness was also shaped by management practices. In certain instances, branches were insufficiently engaged in planning and budgeting, and one operation identified the need to establish a governing board to work with the Basic Emergency Organization (BEO) to strengthen project orientation and oversight. Neighbouring-branch support and tighter coordination in large-scale projects were cited as priority enablers for future cycles.

Coordination Architecture and Its Utilization (RCRC and Government)

Coordination functioned on three complementary levels and was actively used throughout. Internally, SLRCS collaborated with IFRC's Country Representation in Colombo, the Country Cluster Delegation in New Delhi, and APRO to guide planning and operations, with targeted technical inputs where relevant—ICRC support on Restoring Family Links, Safer Access, and First Aid in the MDRLK018 operation; Singapore Red Cross engagement on dengue control in MDRLK019 operation; and IFRC PMER and finance support for monitoring and settlement in the MDRLK020 operation. Government-led mechanisms anchored the response: the DMC led overall coordination and safety centres; District and Divisional Secretariats supported assessments and beneficiary verification; the Department of Irrigation monitored water levels and issued alerts; the Ministry of Health managed sanitation, medical camps, and dengue control; and the National Water Board provided drinking water and well cleaning, while the Tri-forces were deployed for rescue and house repairs as needed. Technical risk information was integrated through NBRO landslide alerts in MDRLK018 and MDRLK019 operations and Meteorological Department early warnings in MDRLK020 operation.

Inter-Agency Collaboration and Complementarity

Inter-agency coordination complemented internal and government systems. SLRCS participated in the Cash Technical Working Group across all three operations and applied the Minimum Expenditure Basket to set cash values. The WASH Technical Working Group coordinated water-damage assessments in MDRLK019 and MDRLK020. Targeted UN/NGO contributions were leveraged per context: WFP flood-impact assessments, Islamic Relief dry rations, and Save the Children’s school support in MDRLK018; UNDP submersible pumps and Save the Children’s drinking-water support in MDRLK019; and in MDRLK020, UNFPA dignity kits in Colombo, UNDP relief packs via DMC, UNHCR coordination for refugees and asylum seekers, and continued education and water assistance from Save the Children. Reported perceptions underline the added value of this ecosystem: 61% of KII respondents rated assistance as “excellent” in terms of coordination and complementarity, 36% as “good,” and 3% as “average.”

Overall Effectiveness

The operations demonstrate a high degree of effectiveness: most KPI targets were achieved or exceeded; under-performing components were typically linked to exogenous approvals, data system gaps, and capacity constraints in business support functions; and adaptive management kept interventions responsive to shifting needs. The coordination architecture—spanning RCRC, government, and inter-agency platforms—was not only present but actively used, contributing to hazard monitoring, needs verification, public health and WASH services, CVA design, and targeted relief. Looking forward, strengthening beneficiary data systems, digitalizing cash documentation, easing branch-level liquidity and administration, and scaling volunteer mobilization will further consolidate effectiveness across future flood operations.

Impact and Sustainability

Community-Level Outcomes

Across the three operations, SLRCS generated significant community level outcomes by rapidly restoring safe water sources through the cleaning and rehabilitation of thousands of contaminated wells, and by conducting extensive environmental sanitation and dengue mitigation efforts through hundreds of community clean up campaigns that cleared drainage systems, removed debris, and reduced vector breeding risks across multiple districts. These actions were reinforced by widespread hygiene promotion sessions, school and public space cleanups, and menstrual hygiene support, improving public health and reducing waterborne and vector borne disease threats.

Community health was further strengthened through medical camps and first aid services that provided accessible treatment for injuries, chronic illnesses, and flood related diseases, particularly for vulnerable groups isolated by damaged infrastructure.

Household recovery and dignity were supported through large scale multipurpose cash assistance and essential household item distributions that enabled tens of thousands of people to meet their basic needs, restart daily life, and support local markets.

Education continuity was restored where needed, with school pack distributions ensuring children could quickly return to learning. Finally, through strong community engagement, transparent selection processes, hotline-based

feedback systems, and inclusive targeting, the operations strengthened social cohesion, accountability, and trust while building community level preparedness and volunteer capacity for future disasters.

Institutional-Level Outcomes and Systems Strengthening

At the institutional level, the operations reinforced Sri Lanka’s coordination architecture. The DMC’s leadership of response and safety centres, NDRSC’s role in relief distribution and damage updates, and District/Divisional Secretariats’ involvement in assessments and beneficiary verification were consolidated, while technical risk information from the Department of Irrigation, NBRO, and the Meteorological Department fed into decision-making. Within the Movement, SLRCS coordination with the IFRC Country Office, the Country Cluster Delegation in New Delhi, and APRO strengthened technical guidance, monitoring, and financial settlement. Inter-agency platforms were actively used: SLRCS consistently applied the Cash Working Group’s Minimum Expenditure Basket for cash-grant design and engaged the WASH Technical Working Group for sector alignment and water-damage assessments.



Photo: KIIs conducted during the field visit

Unintended Consequences - Positive and Negative

Fifty-seven percent of KII respondents reported unintended consequences arising from the operations. Positively, communities described increased empowerment and awareness, alongside improvements in the timeliness of cash disbursements. On the negative side, some respondents noted elements of dependency on cash assistance, insufficient sanitation support including temporary toilets, allocation disparities where large households received the same assistance as smaller ones, and occasional tensions when neighbouring households were not selected. These mixed effects underline the need to calibrate transfer values, strengthen sanitation components, and transparently communicate selection decisions.

Links to Recovery, Development, and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)

The responses demonstrated emerging pathways to longer-term outcomes but lacked formalized transition plans. Review documents did not include explicit exit strategies, and sustainability references were limited, particularly for PGI and health initiatives after immediate response phases. Volunteer retention at branch level remains a challenge, as many volunteers are recruited for operations but struggle to remain active when sustained field work is limited. Nonetheless, KIIs pointed to potential long-term gains: adoption of Build Back Safer practices, improved community hygiene behaviours, and livelihood support through farming tools and income-generating activities, all of which can reinforce recovery and resilience if maintained. Capacity gains were also reported: male branch staff and volunteers highlighted strengthened competencies in first aid, assessments, warehousing, cash programming, camp and evacuation centre management, as well as coordination with authorities, while female volunteers noted improved MHPSS communication skills, strengthened knowledge on beneficiary selection and on how to perform a needs assessment as well as identify the root causes of floods. Even so, broader DRR integration, such as community risk assessments, contingency planning, and systematic early warning linkages, was not consistently documented, limiting the consolidation of these gains into a comprehensive resilience agenda.

Anticipatory Action Capacity - IFRC Support to SLRCS

Over the past few years, SLRCS, supported by IFRC, has advanced markedly in anticipatory action. Milestones include hosting the first National AA Workshop in September 2023 to develop a national roadmap and establish a Technical Working Group; convening Sri Lanka's first Dialogue Platform on AA in September 2024 and engaging in the South Asia Dialogue Platform, positioning the country as a regional contributor to AA policy and practice; and launching in June 2025 the first simplified sEAP targeting dengue in five high-risk districts, with rainfall and epidemiological triggers enabling early community cleanups and vector control. IFRC's role encompassed validating the dengue sEAP, co-hosting workshops, advising on forecast-based financing and disaster law integration, and embedding AA priorities into the Unified Plan for Sri Lanka (2022–2025), including forecast-based protocols, contingency planning, and public authority coordination while aligning with the global EW4All initiative. These developments mark a shift from ad-hoc anticipatory measures to structured planning and protocols, laying the groundwork to scale AA and access dedicated financing under IFRC-DREF's Anticipatory Action pillar.

Adequacy of the IFRC-DREF Mechanism for Recurring Flood Needs

The IFRC-DREF mechanism proved effective for rapid mobilization and immediate relief, yet its current design is only partially adequate for Sri Lanka's recurring flood profile. The standard operational timeframe and short-term focus can be misaligned with complex, large-scale events, as reflected in MDRLK018's timeframe extension to nine months and a budget that more than doubled. Recurring bottlenecks in logistics, finance, and beneficiary data management further constrained timeliness and quality. Going forward, strengthening preparedness through pre-agreements with government, digitalized beneficiary databases, and bolstered branch-level financial capacity will be critical to ensure the mechanism's adequacy in recurrent flood contexts.

Overall Impact and Sustainability

The operations delivered meaningful community-level gains in food security, WASH access, and public health, while bolstering institutional coordination across government, Movement partners, and interagency platforms. The responses also generated skills, practices, and assets that can underpin recovery and resilience, even as the absence of explicit exit strategies and uneven DRR integration limited the durability of these linkages. Recent progress in anticipatory action, catalysed by IFRC's technical support, points to a credible pathway for earlier, more -risk informed- interventions, while targeted improvements to IFRC-DREF design and branch level- systems would help translate rapid relief into sustained impact in future flood cycles.

Anticipatory Action for Floods in Sri Lanka: System Barriers and Pathways to Scale

Sri Lanka faces several interconnected technical, financial, and institutional barriers that complicate the development of a nationwide Floods EAP. A primary challenge is the complexity of accurately measuring triggers across the country’s 103 river basins. While larger basins benefit from relatively robust monitoring systems, many smaller or remote basins lack sufficient gauging infrastructure, reliable real-time data, and comprehensive historical records. This uneven monitoring landscape makes it difficult to establish standardized, impact-based triggers that can be applied consistently at national scale.

A second major constraint relates to limited and unpredictable seed funding for trigger monitoring and system maintenance. Building and sustaining a reliable monitoring network requires investment in equipment, data-management platforms, technical expertise, and ongoing operation and maintenance. Without dedicated, long-term financing, the reliability and continuity of trigger systems remain at risk, particularly across priority basins with limited existing infrastructure.

Additional operational and institutional challenges include weak coordination and data-sharing mechanisms between hydrological, meteorological, and disaster-management agencies; limited sub-national capacity to interpret forecasts and activate early actions; and wide variability in flood-risk profiles across districts, which complicates the design of a single national EAP. Strengthening linkages between scientific forecasting, community-level early warning dissemination, and pre-defined early actions is essential to ensure timely and coordinated implementation.

Despite the complex barriers to establishing a nationwide floods EAP, Sri Lanka has made meaningful progress in advancing anticipatory action through strong leadership, strategic integration, and growing technical capacity. The achievements of SLRCS (ranging from protocol development and stakeholder engagement to national coordination) provide a solid foundation for scaling AA approaches. Continued investments in monitoring systems, institutional capacity, and cross-agency coordination will be essential to operationalizing a coherent, country-wide anticipatory action framework. With sustained collaboration and targeted resource mobilization, Sri Lanka is well positioned to strengthen early action, reduce disaster impacts, and enhance community resilience in the years ahead.

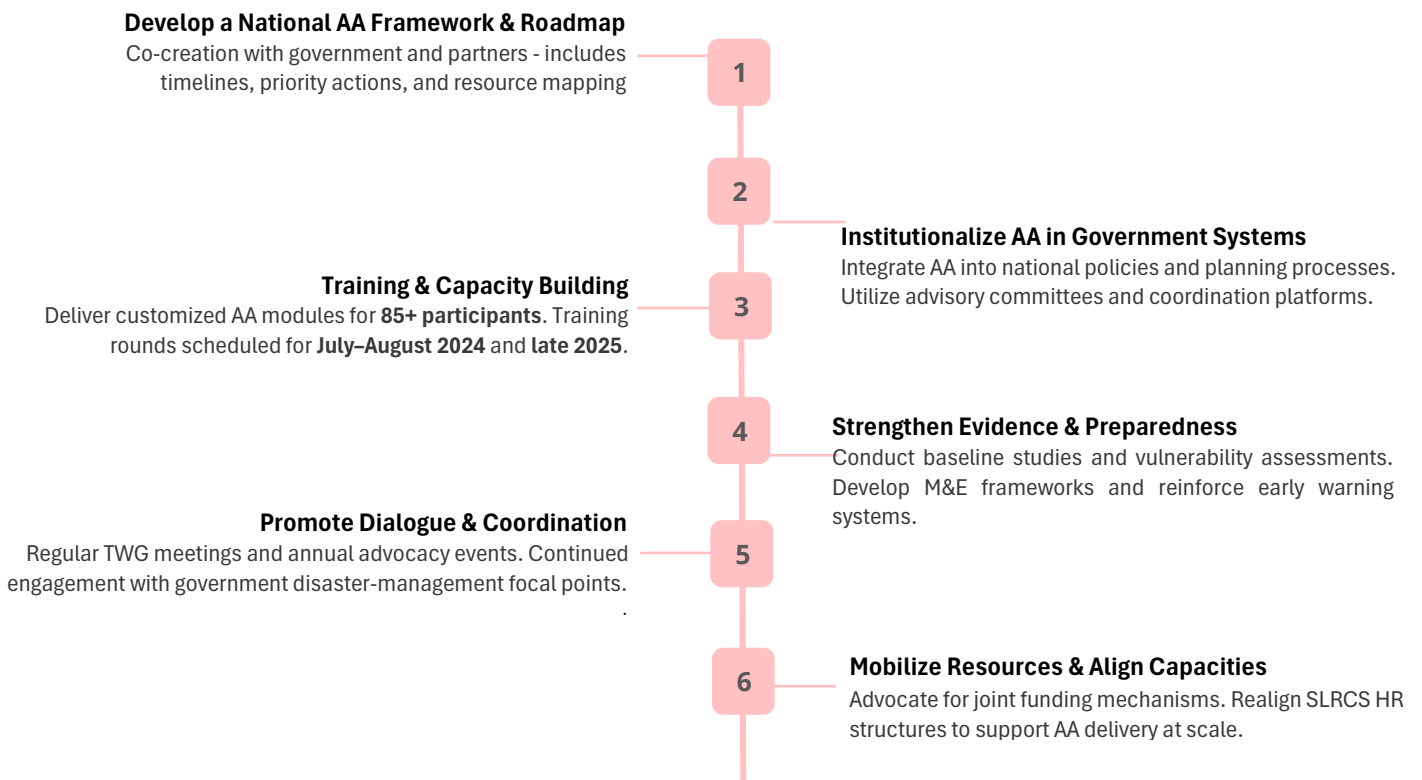
SLRCS’s Achievements on Anticipatory Action to Date

The SLRCS has made significant strides in anticipatory action, from strategic integration and operational impact to national coordination and protocol development.

1	Strategic Integration The SLRCS Strategic Plan 2024–2030 explicitly integrates anticipatory action under Goal 1: <i>“Reduce Risks, Enhance Preparedness & Anticipatory Actions.”</i>
2	Operational Contributions Mobilized 5,000+ volunteers , invested LKR 3.52 billion in humanitarian programming, and supported 4.7 million people , including 500,000+ affected by emergencies such as floods, landslides, and epidemics.
3	Leadership in Coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Co-hosted the first national Anticipatory Action Dialogue Platform (Sept 2023).• Played a central role in forming the Anticipatory Action Technical Working Group (TWG) in Feb 2024 with IWMI, World Vision, and WFP.

4	Protocol Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed and validated a dengue anticipatory action protocol. Drafted flood anticipatory SOPs to complement existing flood response procedures.
5	Mapping and Stakeholder Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mapped agencies active in anticipatory action (e.g., UNDP, WFP, Sarvodaya). Organized workshops and dialogue platforms to build technical understanding and stakeholder alignment.
6	Institutional Embedding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appointed AA focal points and integrated AA into senior leadership agendas. Embedded AA approaches within preparedness, health, and climate-resilience programming.

Action Plan (2024–2027)



Recommendations

Thematic Area	Recommendation	Rationale	Responsible Operational/Technical Teams
Digital Beneficiary & Cash Management System	Design and roll out a digital, centralised beneficiary registration and cash management system (including sex/age/disability and household-size data) for flood responses, linked to standardised tools at branch level.	Recurrent delays and data inconsistencies undermined timeliness and targeting, while flat transfers did not reflect household size and specific vulnerabilities.	Lead: SLRCS HQ (DM/CVA + IM/IT + Finance) Support: IFRC CVA, IM and Finance teams (APRO/CCD) for system design, templates, and training.
Strengthening Branch-Level Finance, Logistics and M&E Capacity	Establish a structured capacity building package for branches (dedicated finance focal points, basic logistics/warehouse support, laptops/equipment for finance and data, improved monitoring visit tools and training).	Operations were efficient overall but repeatedly constrained by delayed fund disbursement to branches, limited admin budgets, insufficient finance staff/equipment, transport and warehouse gaps, and issues with monitoring report quality. These bottlenecks directly limited the effectiveness of the standard DREF time window.	Lead: SLRCS HQ (Finance, Logistics, PMER) Support: IFRC Logistics, Finance and PMER for curricula and mentorship
Gender Responsive CEA and Decision-Making	Institutionalise gender responsive CEA practices in flood operations , including women-only consultation spaces, women-led focus groups, accessible complaint mechanisms, and systematic collection/use of sex disaggregated feedback in decision-making.	While CEA systems were strong and 75% of KII respondents reported community influence, women across groups felt there was “not enough engagement,” revealing a gendered participation gap despite robust overall feedback architecture.	Lead: SLRCS CEA/PGI units and branch teams Support: IFRC CEA, PGI and MHPSS teams to adapt tools, train volunteers and monitor gendered perceptions of inclusion.
Pre-Agreed Government	Develop pre-agreed protocols with Government authorities (tax exemptions,	Delays due to tax exemptions, health-department approvals,	Lead: SLRCS HQ (DM, Logistics, Health/WASH) with Government

Thematic Area	Recommendation	Rationale	Responsible Operational/Technical Teams
Procedures & Preparedness for Recurring Floods	medical camp approvals, access to official data) and integrate logistical and Shelter/WASH preparedness actions (boats, well-cleaning equipment, portable toilets, water storage, small-scale drainage/canal works) into national and SLRCS contingency plans.	incomplete/ inaccessible government data and logistical access to remote areas repeatedly constrained timeliness, while communities emphasised the need for sanitation, drainage and structural works to mitigate impacts. These issues are predictable in recurrent floods.	counterparts (DMC, MOH, NDRSC, Irrigation, Water Board) Support: IFRC DM, Disaster Law, Health/WASH and Logistics DREF Management: Reflect the importance of pre agreements and preparedness measures in guidance and eligibility notes for DREF (especially under recurrent flood contexts).
Operationalising Flood Anticipatory Action under IFRC-DREF	Build on existing AA progress (Dengue sEAP, AA TWG, flood AA SOPs), prioritize 1–2 high risk river basins for a phased flood AA approach , combining improved monitoring (gauges/data), agreed triggers, pre-defined early actions (cash, WASH, evacuation support), and dedicated pre-financing channels linked to the DREF Anticipatory Pillar.	The review confirms that combining SLRCS operational capacity with AA allows reaching more people with the same resources, but system level barriers (uneven monitoring, weak data sharing, limited sub-national forecasting capacity, unpredictable seed funding) currently prevent a functional flood EAP. DREF alone, as a reactive tool, is insufficient for recurring floods.	Lead: SLRCS AA focal points and DM team, in coordination with the AA TWG and Government hydromet/DRM agencies Support: IFRC AA/Climate/DM and IM teams for technical design and resource mobilization DREF Management: Provide targeted technical accompaniment and clearer pathways for transitioning from pilots to fully financed flood AA operations under the DREF Anticipatory Pillar.

Conclusion

The Sri Lanka floods operations demonstrate that **extended timeframes and flexible use of DREF resources can significantly enhance the depth and breadth of response**, provided that strong National Society capacities and coordination mechanisms are in place. In the MDRLK018 operation, the timeframe extension to nine months and a substantially increased budget allowed SLRCS to scale up cash, health and WASH activities to reach more people than initially planned, illustrating the potential of DREF when operations are adapted to actual context and needs rather than constrained by default time windows. Across all three operations, the combination of rapid mobilisation, robust coordination with authorities and partners, and sound financial management contributed to timely assistance, good coverage and high levels of community satisfaction.

However, the extended timeframe by itself **did not resolve underlying systemic challenges**. Procurement delays, tax exemptions, health-department approvals, incomplete beneficiary data, and limited branch-level finance/logistics capacity persisted even in the longer operation, and remained visible in subsequent shorter ones. Flat cash transfers continued to struggle with inflation and differentiated needs; sanitation and structural mitigation needs were not fully met; and volunteer mobilisation targets were not always realistic. This indicates that simply extending DREF timeframes, without parallel investments in preparedness systems, digitalisation and branch capacities, can mitigate but not eliminate structural bottlenecks.

The review therefore suggests that future DREF operations for **recurring, predictable floods** should be conceived less as isolated, short-term interventions and more as components within a **wider resilience and AA ecosystem**. On the one hand, DREF remains well-suited for rapid response and scaling of proven modalities like CVA, WASH, and health services, particularly when anchored in strong national coordination systems. On the other hand, sustainable improvements in timeliness, coverage and value for money will depend on the development of pre-agreed government protocols, digital beneficiary systems, branch-level support functions, and operational flood AA frameworks that allow early action on the basis of risk information.

Under the new 2025 DREF Procedures, these findings are highly relevant. They point to **the need for clearer space within DREF guidance and design** for (a) limited preparedness investments that directly address recurring bottlenecks; (b) coherent integration between the Response and Anticipatory Pillars; and (c) context-specific flexibility for operations where hazards are both recurrent and complex. For Sri Lanka, this means that future DREF allocations—whether anticipatory or responsive—should be explicitly linked to the country’s evolving AA roadmap, flood AA SOPs and government DRM frameworks, ensuring that each operation not only responds to immediate needs but also contributes to a cumulative strengthening of systems that will reduce flood impacts over time.

For further information, please contact:

Nenad MATEJIC

IFRC-DREF Accountability and Compliance Senior Officer

nenad.matejic@ifrc.org

Mark MCCAUL

Project Manager, Canadian Red Cross

Mark.McCaul@redcross.ca