

## LESSON 4:

# USE EARLY WARNINGS OF DROUGHT AND MAKE TIMELY DROUGHT DECLARATIONS

**Humanitarian and development actors must anticipate risks rather than react to crises. Governments need to make evidence-based and timely drought declarations and not wait until the full impact of a drought has materialised.**

Climate-related hazards are increasing in frequency, intensity and complexity; yet drought responses remain fragmented and reactive. As drought cycles shorten, humanitarian and development actors must better connect climate monitoring, early warning and preparedness mechanisms to ensure interventions happen before impacts become emergencies. Integrating climate and environmental risk management into programmes contributes to anticipating potential shock, in order to design adaptive interventions and link immediate humanitarian response to long-term climate resilience.

Weaknesses in early warning, assessment and information systems, as well as in decision-making processes, repeatedly delay action and result in aid only being mobilised following media attention. Improved access to climate-information systems would help local communities to understand long-term trends and shifting weather patterns, enabling them to adapt their agricultural practices. These weaknesses underscore the need for anticipatory data systems that generate reliable, real-time information and – importantly – trigger funding before conditions deteriorate. When early warning is integrated with flexible financing and national coordination systems, it enables faster, more cost-effective and more preventative responses that protect livelihoods and save lives.

In some cases, even when early warning information is available and trusted, affected households may be unable to act due to financial, social or logistical barriers. As such, strengthening early warning systems alone is insufficient; support mechanisms – including timely and flexible financing – must also be put in place to enable families to take protective measures and adapt to emerging risks.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Experts from the Delphi panel also noted that, in many contexts, donors can only release funds, states can only provide financial assistance, insurance companies can only pay out and responsible authorities can only begin drought-management governance arrangements once national authorities have formally declared a drought.

Number of documents contributing to the lessons: 43

Average evidence scores of all documents contributing to the lessons: 3.9

Median evidence strength of documents contributing to the lessons: 80%

Government recognition of a drought can be delayed for political reasons or procrastination caused by inter-agency (or inter-ministry) tugs of war over data and definitions. In some cases, humanitarian actors have been reluctant to push governments to officially recognise a drought due to fears of being seen as contradicting a government's narrative. It may be necessary for actors and donors to balance alignment with governments with advocacy for reforms, transparency and accountability.

If necessary, the capacity of governments (both national and subnational/local) to monitor drought should be resourced and strengthened in the use of technical datasets (such as precipitation, hydrological, agricultural and associated indicators) so that governments can use them in real-time to officially declare drought at the appropriate level – whether local, provincial, subnational/regional or national.

'Pre-drought declarations' issued before drought conditions fully materialise (based on early warning indicators on, for example, precipitation, crop and vegetation health) can act as an anticipatory alert to mobilise resources and enable preventative measures, such as water rationing and storage, the distribution of drought-resistant seeds and early livelihood-protection support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Humanitarian and development actors should integrate climate and environmental risk management across programmes, linking early warning, preparedness and long-term adaptation.
- Humanitarian, development and government actors should promote the adoption of unified and interoperable early warning systems to improve consistency, credibility, timeliness and the quality of needs assessments, and to reduce delayed or reactive responses.
- Donors and humanitarian actors should invest in harmonised systems for risk data and early warning, including comprehensive shocks data and clear crisis-modifier guidance.
- Humanitarian and development actors should ensure that new and existing early warning systems adequately include pastoral areas and populations that are often excluded.
- Humanitarian and development actors, working with governments, should establish joint, pre-agreed triggers that enable early action before formal crisis declarations, drawing on indigenous and community knowledge where appropriate. For example, anticipatory cash transfers should be used before peak drought.
- Humanitarian actors should communicate early warning information in ways that are accessible, easily understood and trusted by populations affected by drought, including women and groups with limited access to information channels. Designing early warning systems with people affected by drought supports relevance, uptake and timely protective action.

- 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4
  - 5
  - 6
  - 7
  - 8
  - 9
  - 10
  - 11
  - 12
  - 13
  - 14
  - 15
  - 16
  - 17
- Governments should have clear legislative and policy frameworks for drought declaration, setting out required data, responsible institutions, trigger levels and decision-making authority.
  - Governments and technical agencies, including those supporting them, should agree on key meteorological, hydrological, agricultural and socioeconomic definitions and indicators to inform drought declaration processes.
  - Humanitarian actors and donors should be prepared to engage in coordinated advocacy in cases where delays in drought declaration or response appear to be driven by political or institutional constraints, including corruption.