

# Preparedness and Support Plan

**Asia Pacific: El Niño**

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A. Situation analysis

According to the latest [seasonal forecast](http://www.climatecentre.org/downloads/files/Seasonal%20Forecast%20Nov2015%20-%20Jan2016.pdf) (covering December 2015 to February 2016) issued by the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre (RCCC) and the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI), there is a strong El Niño currently occurring. The El Niño is expected to peak in the next three months and then dissipate during the first half of 2016. This analysis was further reinforced by IRI in a related statement: “One of the strongest El Nino events ever measured is now underway. It is already causing droughts and flooding in different parts of the world and affecting food production, water availability, public health and energy supplies in a number of countries...and although the world is much better prepared for this year’s El Niño, the socio-economic shocks will still be profound.[[1]](#footnote-1)"

With regard to Asia, there is increased confidence that Andaman Islands, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines will be unusually dry during December 2015 to February 2016. There is also increased confidence that eastern China, Japan, the Maldives and Taiwan will be unusually wet during the same period.

In the Pacific, there is an increased chance of reduced rainfall across Southwest Pacific and enhanced rainfall in central and eastern Pacific. In particular, there is an increased chance of unusually dry conditions in the Cook Islands, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu during the period December 2015 to February 2016. There is also increased confidence that Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu will be unusually wet during the same period *(see the* [*latest map*](http://iridl.ldeo.columbia.edu/maproom/IFRC/FIC/prcp_fcst.html) *at the IFRC/IRI map room).*

Over the past few months, a succession of unusual weather events have been recorded across Asia; they include widespread drought in Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam as well as drought-induced water rationing planned in Thailand. Typhoons and drought may affect more than one billion people in southeastern Asia this fall.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the Pacific, UN OCHA has reported that as many as 4.7 million people in 11 Pacific countries are at risk of adverse effects of drought, including water shortages, food insecurity and disease.[[3]](#footnote-3) Drought conditions are already being experienced in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, with Fiji also experiencing severe water shortages.

Climate scientists have confirmed that many of these events are linked to the ongoing El Niño.

B. Possible humanitarian impacts

Possible needs that may arise due to El Niño

The current El Niño comes on top of already volatile and erratic weather patterns linked to the effects of climate change. Already, 2015 has been described as the hottest year ever recorded. Based on existing seasonal forecasts, a number of Asia Pacific countries are most at-risk of extreme weather, including below-normal rains or drier-than-average conditions that may cause drought and unusually heavy rains that may result in flooding.

However, it is important to note that the impacts of El Niño, the scenarios described below and the scale of needs across the regional will vary depending on specific communities’ set of vulnerabilities and preparedness and response capacities, as well as how intensely El Niño influences the local climate in the area.

**Food security**

The two likely impacts of El Niño – droughts and flooding – can lead to increased food insecurity due to low crop yields, scarcity of staple food, effects on livestock, impact on fish yields (due to warming of sea temperatures) and increase in prices of essential food items in the markets.

**Livelihoods**

Drought conditions, rising temperatures and flooding will have major implications on agriculture, livestock and fisheries. In addition to food insecurity, prolonged dry spells could force small, poor farmers – who are usually marginalized even when there is adequate water supply – deeper into debt and result in loss of income to thousands, if not millions, of people who rely on agriculture, livestock and fisheries for employment.

Furthermore, prolonged dry spells may affect water levels in hydro-electric generation dams, prompting power rationing which can in turn affect enterprises that rely on electricity and result in disrupted labour opportunities as enterprises put measures to minimize operational costs.

**Water, sanitation and hygiene promotion**

Both drought and flooding conditions would have an impact on access to safe water and improved sanitation. On the one hand, in drought conditions, adequate quantities may be depleted leaving communities without sufficient safe water for drinking and other use, and rendering sanitation facilities that rely on water – such as pour flush latrines – non-usable. On the other hand, flooding could lead to contamination and/or damage of water sources. Depleted and damaged water supply systems or flooded sanitation infrastructure may fuel water and vector borne diseases.

**Health and care**

In a recently-published document report, ‘Health Preparedness for El Nino Event 2015-2016,’ WHO identified possible health consequences associated with El Niño and extreme weather conditions. Droughts and flood triggered food insecurity would increase malnutrition and thereby enhancing vulnerability to infectious diseases. Extremely dry conditions may lead to heat waves, wildfires and deteriorated air quality, resulting in respiratory infections, among others. Extensive rainfall and flooding may prompt closure of health facilities and disruption of regular services, as well as destroy public health and other supportive infrastructure, and in the process restrict access to healthcare.

Furthermore, reduced household income would limit the ability of people to pay for health services, including medicines. In addition, stress due to increased level of vulnerabilities may prompt psychosocial needs.

**Shelter**

Both drought and flooding conditions may cause widespread displacement; the former, as affected people flee to areas where water, jobs and essential services are deemed to be still available and the latter by damaging/destroying people’s homes. Furthermore, in drought conditions, rural communities that rely on thatch and other plant/wood products for roofing or building will face a shortage of the materials. In the event of displacement, affected people would need assistance to secure alternative shelter while in case of damage to homes, affected families would need support to rebuild or repair their damaged homes.

**Social inclusion and protection**

A scarcity of resources and potential influx of people from affected areas to those deemed to have access to jobs and essential services could create tensions in some communities. Owing to shortages of food, water and other essentials, some community members may not want to share resources with others while others may opt to steal from those who have, thereby breaking social cohesion. Potential cases of violence, including against women and children, may also increase as male family heads are forced to be away from their homes for prolonged periods in search of food, essential items and work opportunities.

**Community preparedness and disaster risk reduction**

There is a need to ensure prioritization of disaster risk reduction initiatives, including development of preparedness and response plans to meet the challenges summarized above as well as in anticipation of a future potential La Niña event.

C. Red Cross Red Crescent action

Since El Niño conditions will continue over the coming months, measures taken now will have enormous returns, both in terms of enhancing community preparedness and alleviating suffering of those most at-risk.

Various countries across Asia Pacific are at different stages of preparedness and/or response, facing different risks linked to the current El Niño. Some, including Fiji, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, are already responding to a number of existing humanitarian crises that may be attributed to or are being exacerbated by El Niño. The IFRC system – the Secretariat and National Societies – is ready to address further potential humanitarian impacts that El Niño will bring to vulnerable communities at most risk.

Based on historical trends, many El Niño events are followed by La Niña events. While that has not necessarily been the case for all El Niño events, it is important to consider the likelihood of a La Niña event in preparedness planning for 2016. The IFRC system will continue to be vigilant, informed by scientific forecasts and experience, so that it contributes reducing disaster risk and is positioned to respond to potential humanitarian impacts in a timely manner.

Action taken by IFRC and National Societies so far

Different approaches have been taken by the IFRC to support National Societies whose countries are feeling, or are likely to feel, the effects of El Niño. The support provided so far has taken into account individual country contexts, National Society capacities and needs of vulnerable people. It has focused on monitoring of forecasts, information sharing and readiness planning. Furthermore, three countries – Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu – have received financial and technical support from the IFRC to undertake a range of response activities within ongoing operations or through allocations from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF).

Specifically, in January 2015, the Asia Pacific Office Disaster Management Unit (DMU) took “early action” and included in its December 2014 operations update a section on potential El Niño and attached the seasonal forecast as well as a guidance note on long-term forecasts from the RCCC. Starting June, the Asia Pacific Regional Office worked closely with the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre to prepare a document titled: *Guidance on El Niño and the use of seasonal forecast for early warning and early action in Asia Pacific*. The document includes an explanation on how seasonal forecasts disseminated by RCCC could be used by National Societies and some low-regrets actions that can/could be taken to alleviate the impacts of El Niño. After being updated in September, the draft document was shared with Secretariat offices in Bangkok, Dili, Jakarta and Suva for the respective offices to use in their discussions with National Societies with regard to El Niño preparedness.

In the course of October, a preparedness meeting – for the Pacific cyclone season, which is likely to be more active due to the current El Niño – was held in Suva during which surge capacity was mapped out and some selected technical persons, including Regional Disaster Response Team (RDRT) members, in Pacific were briefed and asked to confirm availability for potential deployments. Emergency rosters have been prepared for Pacific, with details of technical specialists and generalists available for immediate response if needed. The support could be scaled up, including via global surge tools, depending on evolving situation.

Following humanitarian impacts brought by drought or drier-than-average conditions in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, IFRC has provided financial and technical support to the respective National Societies:

* **Indonesia:** IFRC has allocated funds – from DREF and a grant from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) – for Indonesian Red Cross Society (PMI) response to forest fires which resulted in parts of Borneo and western Sumatra being enveloped in a toxic haze. Efforts to extinguish the fires were hampered due to the dry conditions worsened by the current El Niño event. With IFRC support, PMI has established emergency houses, also known as “smoke-free facilities”, equipped with air purifiers aimed at easing the respiratory problems caused by the haze. These centres are catering particularly to vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women and the elderly, including by providing first aid, basic symptomatic treatment, health education, psycho-social support and referral to health facilities in case needed. See [DREF Plan of Action](http://adore.ifrc.org/Download.aspx?FileId=108816) for details.
* **Papua New Guinea:** IFRC has allocated funds – from DREF – for the Papua New Guinea Red Cross Society (PNGRCS) response to a drought caused by a prolonged dry spell that has been attributed to the current El Niño conditions and consequence of changing climatic conditions. With IFRC support, PNGRCS is prioritizing the Western Highlands region where populations have been severely affected by shortage of water and food supply. For details on the response, refer to the [DREF Operations Update](http://adore.ifrc.org/Download.aspx?FileId=108595).
* **Vanuatu:** IFRC is supporting the Vanuatu Red Cross Society (VRCS) – within the context of an ongoing response to Tropical Cyclone Pam – to address community needs worsened by drought conditions attributed to the current El Niño. With support of IFRC, VRCS is conducting sensitization sessions around water, sanitation and the promotion of good hygiene. Since most communities rely on rainwater, VRCS is helping to rehabilitate wells and to improve rainwater harvesting capacities so that water from excessive rainfall during the 2015-2016 cyclone season can be collected for household use. For details, refer to [the web story](http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/asia-pacific/vanuatu/el-nino-brings-drought-and-heightened-cyclone-risk-to-vanuatu--69517/) issued on 21 October.

As well as implementing ongoing response operations, IFRC and National Societies are also coordinating with various actors – public authorities, UN agencies and other stakeholders – in the context of El Niño preparedness and response mechanisms. IFRC offices in Bangkok, Dili, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Suva have participated, and will continue to participate, in various inter-agency forums where preparedness and support plans are discussed.

Meantime, the communications unit of the Asia Pacific Office is finalizing a set of key messages on what the IFRC system has done on preparedness and response to mitigate the effects of El Niño. The key messages will be shared within and outside the Movement in coordination with the Secretariat head office in Geneva.

D. Support strategy

IFRC and National Societies must be prepared to address the needs of communities vulnerable to the humanitarian impacts of the current El Niño as well as to contribute towards reducing the risk of disaster in view of the potential La Niña[[4]](#footnote-4). This plan, therefore, outlines possible interventions and support that would enable delivery of timely assistance.

Overall objective

The overall objective is to ensure that populations at risk of El Niño impacts receive appropriate assistance in a timely, effective, and efficient manner and are supported to strengthen disaster resilience.

**Potential interventions by sector**

**Food security**

To address needs related to food insecurity, measures such as feeding programmes, food distributions and provision of cash transfers for multi-purpose needs will be necessary.

**Livelihoods**

In the scenarios where livelihoods are significantly impacted, appropriate actions to protect, recover and/or diversify livelihoods would need to be taken. These would be context-specific but could include cash transfers and in-kind support as well as vocational training or technical skill development. The main result would be to empower individuals for accessing household income so that they can meet needs across a wide range of sectors.

**Water, sanitation and hygiene promotion**

The would be a need for interventions aimed at ensuring access to WASH items, restoring or improving access to safe water and improving solid waste management. These would need to be complemented with hygiene promotion activities aimed at improving behaviour and bridging knowledge with practice of proper hygiene.

**Health and care**

To address health needs, activities such as health education sessions would be done alongside provision of enabling items such as mosquito nets and oral rehydration salts. In cases where health facilities were to be damaged, support would include rehabilitation and equipping of such facilities. Psychosocial support interventions would also be undertaken in communities as well as for carers who would be under high stress to respond to prolonged needs.

**Shelter**

To meet the immediate essential household item needs, distribution of non-food items would need to be undertaken. In meeting shelter needs, context-specific solutions such as provision of emergency shelter items, support to rent shelter and assistance to repair or rebuild would have to be undertaken in affected communities.

**Social inclusion and protection**

Activities that could be undertaken would include community-based initiatives that promote social inclusion, social safety nets and access to basic services by disadvantaged and/or marginalized groups. Others would be measures to prevent and mitigate inter-personal and community violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.

**Community preparedness and disaster risk reduction**

Interventions would include community awareness and public education campaigns, including in schools, to sensitize local authorities and communities on risks associated with El Niño and necessary risk reduction actions to undertake. Others include linking with national meteorological systems to complement dissemination or interpretation of forecasts to enhance early warning capacities in communities.

Linked to early warning, would be support for early actions such as digging trenches, planting trees and grass for erosion control, identifying ‘safer’ areas for relocation of people at risk and installation of water harvesting systems to collect water from excessive rainfall for use when drier conditions set in.

Support strategy

A starting point is the ‘every time’ – based on experience from responses to previous El Niño and La Niña events as well as to other disasters – and current responses of various National Societies. What is important is that IFRC and National Societies recognize that the intensity of the events will demand an approach that is not ‘business as usual’.

**Monitoring of meteorological forecasts**

Working closely with the RCCC, the Asia Pacific Regional Office and Country-Cluster Support Teams (CCSTs) will continue maintaining a robust monitoring system, including of seasonal forecasts, to obtain a picture of emerging trends and impacts of the El Niño and related events. Country offices and National Societies will liaise with national meteorological systems for the same.

**Dissemination of forecasts to National Societies**

The Asia Pacific Regional Office, CCSTs and country offices will ensure that information obtained through a robust monitoring system, including of seasonal forecasts, is passed on to National Societies. This will contribute to informed decision-making and in turn timely action by the IFRC system.

**Public awareness and public education (PAPE)**

National Societies will interpret and package forecasts obtained from their national meteorological systems or wider for dissemination to communities at risk so as to enhance early warning. National Societies will utilize appropriate channels so that communities understand the risks associated with El Niño and undertake early actions. For instance, one of the resources for PAPE in the Pacific is the ‘[Climate Crab Toolkit](http://www.pacificclimatechangescience.org/animations/climatecrab/)’.

**Communications**

IFRC and National Societies will work closely to develop a common approach towards communicating as a Federation in order to build public awareness around the humanitarian needs that may be brought by El Niño and La Niña and to position the IFRC system an important player in delivering humanitarian assistance and strengthening disaster resilience. This will include preparing key messages and talking points.

**Advocacy**

Proactive and effective engagement with a range of internal and external partners – including public authorities, donor agencies, UN system, INGOs and local civil society groups – will be critical. Among others, such engagement will demonstrate the collective capacity of the IFRC system with the view of nurturing partnerships as well as identifying funding opportunities to enable timely action in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups.

**Coordination**

The IFRC and National Societies will continue to coordinate with various on El Niño preparedness and response mechanisms. Such coordination will contribute towards finding areas of working together, providing a platform to promote application of common approaches and minimizing duplication of efforts.

**Prepositioning of stocks and equipment**

The IFRC and National Societies will ensure that sufficient preparedness stocks of non-food items as well as WASH items and equipment are available for timely mobilization to areas that they may be needed.

It is crucial to identify non-food items that may be required for potential distribution so that such items are made available in preparedness stocks or can be readily procured in compliance with IFRC procurement procedures.

In order to have sufficient capacity to support provision of safe drinking water in small-island states of the Pacific, there is a need to have equipment for water desalination. This may be done through developing proactive partnerships with commercial entities that specialize in water desalination for cost-effective delivery of assistance.

**Surge capacity**

It is important to ensure that a well-trained human resource capacity is available for providing timely and relevant technical support to National Societies should the need arise. In this regard, surge capacity, including availability of RDRT members, will be mapped. Updated emergency rosters will be prepared so that deployments from within the region can be actioned quickly, with the option of scaling up via global surge tools.

**Plans of action**

Plans of action, outlining approaches and interventions by various National Societies, will be developed separately by CCSTs and country offices with support of technical units. The plans will be context-specific, just like those of ongoing responses in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

**Funding options**

A crucial element to providing timely technical support to National Societies, and most importantly delivering humanitarian assistance to populations at risk, is funding. In the immediate term, DREF is the funding mechanism for supporting small-scale response and imminent crisis interventions at the country level. Looking ahead, the IFRC regional office for Asia Pacific is liaising with the head office in Geneva to identify appropriate funding mechanisms that can position the Secretariat to provide timely and effective technical support to National Societies that may request such so that the system can implement effective response interventions when needed.

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1. <http://iri.columbia.edu/news/international-conference-on-el-nino-november-17-and-18/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/asia-fall-forecast-2015-el-nino-typhoons-india-drought/52075743> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Pacific_El%20nino%20infographic_20151106.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here are some historical details on weather effects of [El Niño](http://iridl.ldeo.columbia.edu/maproom/IFRC/FIC/elninorain.html) and [La Niña](http://iridl.ldeo.columbia.edu/maproom/IFRC/FIC/laninarain.html). It is important to note that every El Niño and La Niña event is different and, therefore, it is crucial to look at seasonal forecasts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)