



## Acting early when the world isn't watching

# Lessons from anticipatory action in Ethiopia in 2021

## **Highlights**

- For Ethiopia, living with climate volatility requires anticipating droughts and floods and mitigating their impact on the most vulnerable people.
- In 2020, OCHA facilitated an anticipatory action framework in Ethiopia to get ahead of droughts and reduce their impact on vulnerable communities
- OCHA activated the pilot framework in December 2020, while political and humanitarian focus was on the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia.
- The Central Emergency Response Fund released US\$20 million to reduce the drought's impact on more than 900,000 people. The allocation was one of the earliest responses to the 2020-2022 drought.

- Three out of five recipients of assistance reported an improved ability to afford food, livelihood inputs and household bills.
- In a world where humanitarian crises compete for political attention and resources, Ethiopia proves that anticipatory action frameworks make acting early the default.
- The pilot taught valuable lessons in how to improve anticipatory action's impact in the context of protracted and overlapping crises.



Seeds ready for distribution at Chereti woreda, Tofik Kebele on 13 June 2021. Credit: FAO/Tewelde

## **Summary**

When a country is hit by a sudden disaster – an earthquake, a tsunami or floods – the impact is immediate, the crisis makes headlines and aid often follows. But when a country is hit by a slow-moving disaster, such as a drought, it can take months or even years to see the devastating impact. These crises unfold in slow motion: crops fail, livestock die, people sell their assets and leave their homes, women and girls risk their safety as they walk further to find water, and children are pulled from school.

Droughts are predictable, but they too often fail to receive funding until suffering reaches catastrophic levels and dramatic images hit the media. This has been Ethiopia's experience, time and time again.

Between October 2020 and June 2022, Ethiopia experienced five consecutive below-average rainy seasons, with the 2022 March-May season being the driest in 70 years. The drought's prolonged nature ultimately affected an estimated 17 million people.

But this time there was a glimmer of hope. The humanitarian community acted earlier thanks to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) piloting an anticipatory action framework. In December 2020 – earlier than any other donor – OCHA's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) provided US\$20 million to humanitarian partners to reduce the drought's impact on more than 900,000 people.

According to a satisfaction survey caried out by 60\_decibels, more than 60 per cent of the recipients of assistance reported improvements in their overall quality of life. The pilot framework also taught valuable lessons in what anticipatory action means in a prolonged and complex crisis. As Joyce Msuya, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, concluded:

"In 2024, drought is once again driving millions of people to suffer. The Ethiopia anticipatory action pilot demonstrated that if we act earlier, people's lives will be better. We have the evidence, now we must scale."

#### 1 Ethiopia survey report by 60 Decibels.



Firtun Yakob Omar, 21 a mother of 2(L) and her father Yakob Omar Menur, 52 a father of 18 (R) dropping seeds in their farmland supported by FAO in Dolo-Ado woreda, Kelemisge kebele on 12 June 2021. Credit: FAO/Tewelde



18 July 2022. Eli Dar, Afar region. Eli Dar, Afar region. A girl, Fatima, walks with a water container. In eastern Afar, the community at the outskirts of the town of Eli Dar have been experiencing the impact of drought. The grounds that would normally provide a year or more worth of water for the village dried up about 6 months ago and temperatures in the area are into the 40s. Credit: OCHA/Loh-Taylor

## Challenge

Ethiopia is highly vulnerable to severe seasonal droughts; it has experienced them every decade since 1953. They are compounded by conflict, locust invasions, high food prices and localized flooding, meaning communities in Ethiopia continuously receive humanitarian aid.

Over CERF's 18-year history, Ethiopia has consistently ranked among its top five recipient countries, having received \$500 million in CERF funding.

Approximately 40 per cent of that funding has gone to drought relief.

As Ethiopia is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, climate volatility will get worse over the coming years. Positively, advances in weather-and-climate forecasting means there is now more opportunity to limit the humanitarian impact of droughts. However, despite early warning information, the humanitarian community has repeatedly struggled to act due to a lack of resources and competing global priorities.

Following Ethiopia's 2015-2018 droughts – the worst in 30 years – an inter-agency humanitarian evaluation found that the response to those droughts saved lives, but it was not timely.<sup>2</sup> An earlier response could have stopped people from selling assets to purchase food and pay bills. It could have avoided sharp increases in severe acute malnutrition. Fewer children could have dropped out of school and many illnesses could have been prevented.

<sup>2</sup> IASC, Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Drought Response in Ethiopia (February 2020).

### **Solution**

In 2020, OCHA decided to pilot an anticipatory action framework in Ethiopia to see how the humanitarian community could get ahead of drought and reduce its impact on vulnerable communities.

Anticipatory action frameworks use a model or forecast to trigger pre-arranged funding for pre-agreed activities. In essence, a framework pre-determines exactly when funding will be released and who will take what action.

In 2020, OCHA's Centre for Humanitarian Data supported Ethiopia's humanitarian community to develop a trigger for drought as the basis for the framework. The trigger would be activated if climate forecasts and seasonal risk analysis suggested below-average rainfall during the coming rainy season, and if food security conditions were expected to deteriorate based on projections from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.<sup>3</sup> If the trigger was activated, CERF would provide \$20 million to humanitarian partners for a set of predetermined actions.

On 28 October 2020, the UN Humanitarian Country Team endorsed the framework. However, just days later, Ethiopia's Tigray crisis consumed the Government, the humanitarian community and political attention. Dry conditions in south-east Ethiopia and forecasts of another failed rainy season in early 2021 were overlooked among the noise of the escalating conflict. But they were not overlooked by the humanitarian community. It had resources and an agreed plan to translate early warning into action, thanks to the anticipatory action framework in place.

By late November 2020, four regions in Ethiopia met the food insecurity criteria. Almost 13 million people were projected to experience crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity within six months (by June 2021). However, not all seasonal climate forecasts met the threshold – some were more certain in predicting a below-average season than others.

The forecasts' uncertainty did not stop a no-regrets approach. To manage the risk of providing funding and a drought not occurring, CERF decided for the first time to split the allocation in two stages. In December 2020, it allocated \$13 million to fund activities that required a longer lead time and must happen early, such as preparing land and planting drought-resistant crops. It then released a second allocation of \$7 million in February 2021, once the likelihood of below-average rains was confirmed.

At a time when Ethiopia had already experienced one failed rainy season, CERF's funding assisted more than 900,000 people at a critical time, enabling communities to make better choices for their families and supporting livelihoods before it was too late. Unlike in previous droughts, almost half of the recipients (44 per cent) reported that the assistance came at the right time.<sup>4</sup>

Tens of thousands of households received short-cycle/drought-tolerant seeds, livestock packages that included supplemental feeding, treatment and vaccination services, and unconditional cash.<sup>5</sup> Recipients nearly unanimously agreed the assistance was useful.<sup>6</sup>

As one recipient noted: "My family benefited from the assistance, as we used the money to buy food items. In addition, we spent the money to take care of our children, and the animal feed support was also helpful for our livestock, as there was inadequate pasture." Food and Agriculture Organization anticipatory action recipient.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The IPC Acute Food Insecurity classification differentiates between different levels of severity of acute food insecurity. IPC3+ refers to the crisis phase, characterized by a significant lack of food access, high levels of acute malnutrition, and excess mortality.

<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia survey report by 60 Decibels.

<sup>5</sup> CERF Anticipatory Action Report 2021.

<sup>6</sup> E. Easton-Calabria et al, Anticipatory Action in Complex Crises: Lessons from Ethiopia (December, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> E. Easton-Calabria et al, Anticipatory Action in Complex Crises: Lessons from Ethiopia (December, 2023).



On 10 May 2022 in the internally displaced person (IDP) site of Guyah, Afar Region, Ethiopia, 13-year-old Keria (left) and another girl, fetch water from a UNICEF supported water point. Credit: UNICEF/ Sewunet

By utilizing existing community-based structures – such as religious institutions, *kebele* (small administrative unit) leaders, marketplaces, school clubs and local radio stations – almost 250,000 community members learned about drought-related protection risks.<sup>8</sup>

More than 80,000 people were able to access safe drinking water through the early rehabilitation of boreholes and non-functioning water schemes and water piping, including in health facilities and schools. A further 25,000 children received water in school during the drought.<sup>9</sup>

Access to clean water meant less disease. As one recipient observed: "The aid improved and secured our family hygiene and health. We've been able to prevent communicable diseases." *United Nations Population Fund anticipatory action recipient.* 10

To prevent 13,000 children from dropping out of school, almost 3,000 households – mostly female headed – received cash or vouchers to support education costs. A follow-up survey indicated that 100 per cent of the respondents used the cash to buy school materials. In another survey, 90 per cent of the respondents stated the cash helped ensure their children's continued access to education.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, anticipatory action helped to prevent drought-related suffering. A satisfaction survey conducted by 60\_decibels found that three out of five recipients noted an overall improvement in their quality of life due to their increased ability to afford food, livelihood inputs and household bills.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8 &</sup>lt;u>CERF Anticipatory Action Report 2021</u>.

<sup>9</sup> CERF Anticipatory Action Report 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ethiopia survey report by 60 Decibels.

<sup>11</sup> CERF Anticipatory Action Report 2021.

<sup>12</sup> CERF Anticipatory Action Report 2021.

## **Takeaway**

For Ethiopia, living with climate volatility will require anticipating droughts and floods, and mitigating their impact on the most vulnerable people. Ultimately, more climate adaptation is required, but the humanitarian community also has an important role to play. The pilot in Ethiopia demonstrates that anticipatory action holds promise.

In a world where humanitarian crises compete for political attention and resources, Ethiopia illustrates that anticipatory action frameworks make acting early the default.

Catherine Sozi, the former UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Ethiopia, explained: "In late 2020 and 2021, media headlines, political attention and resources were focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia, a military coup in Myanmar, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and a large-scale earthquake in Haiti. No one was paying attention to failed rains in Ethiopia. The anticipatory action framework meant we could act when it would make a difference to communities. We didn't need to wait for people to suffer and the drought to make the headlines."

The pilot also revealed valuable lessons about anticipatory action's place in the context of protracted and overlapping crises and an underfunded response.

Anticipatory action is intended to mitigate the impact of one shock, such as drought. CERF funding came after the first failed rains (October-December 2020), but households had to endure five consecutive below-average rainy seasons (October 2020 to June 2022). Communities also had to live with drought alongside other crises, such as conflict, localized flooding, a locust invasion and inflation.

It's also important to consider the scale of anticipatory action compared to the size of the need.

CERF's \$20 million grant was approximately 1 per cent of the overall requirements of the Humanitarian Response Plan in 2021, and funding requirements for the 2020-2022 drought response were only half met.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore understandable that 49 per cent of the recipients interviewed in 2022 said the anticipatory action assistance hardly met or met none of their drought-related needs.<sup>15</sup>

As Lisa Doughten, Director of OCHA's Financing and Partnerships Division, noted: "CERF funding continues to be an indispensable enabler for anticipatory action, but to truly scale up its impact, more flexible and coordinated financing is needed."

In addition to exposing the impact of funding constraints, the pilot also yielded lessons in how to increase the impact of anticipatory action.

Julia Wittig, Anticipatory Action Lead for CERF, explained: "The pilot helped us to further refine the type of activities and the timing of those interventions. For example, some activities, such as preparing land and distributing seed, must happen early and require a longer lead time. But they are critical to food consumption and preventing negative coping strategies later. The decision to split the CERF allocation allowed us to time interventions for when they make the difference, while mitigating the risks of releasing funding before a drought is certain."

Improving collective targeting can also help to maximize impact. Humanitarian partners jointly identified districts for assistance, but aid was often distributed to different households with different packages of support. The 60\_decibels survey illustrated a more granular approach, where humanitarian partners identify the most vulnerable households to assist with an intersectoral package of support. This could have led to better outcomes for those families. <sup>16</sup> OCHA and humanitarian partners are pursuing collective targeting for anticipatory

<sup>13</sup> Ethiopia survey report by 60 Decibels.

<sup>14</sup> OCHA, Financial Tracking System. Note, the 2021 Ethiopia Humanitarian Response Plan was not exclusive to needs generated by the drought but was a major component. The 2022 Ethiopia Humanitarian Response Plan was in response to the drought and the Tigray crisis.

<sup>15</sup> Ethiopia survey report by 60 Decibels.

<sup>16</sup> Ethiopia survey report by 60 Decibels.

action frameworks in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger.

Ethiopia also helped to improve future anticipatory action triggers for droughts. Ethiopia shows that food security assessments are crucial to determine the population's vulnerability and where to prioritize aid. However, the assessments require some improvements to serve as a trigger for anticipatory action.

Willem Muhren, Head of OCHA's Information Management Unit in Ethiopia, said: "Food security assessments are published after the rainy season so they can estimate what will happen with the food security situation. This is too late, for example, if we want to plant drought-resistant seeds. We need to get ahead of the shock, not just respond earlier."

Since the pilot in Ethiopia, OCHA is focusing on climate indicators for drought-related anticipatory

action frameworks in Burkina Faso, the Central American Dry Corridor, Chad and Niger.

Overall, the pilot successfully mitigated some of the drought's impact on vulnerable households. Importantly, it proved that anticipatory action works, generating momentum in the humanitarian community to get ahead of climate shocks. OCHA will update and renew Ethiopia's anticipatory action framework in 2024, with CERF pre-committing \$15 million.

Given the drought pilot's success, and recognizing the multiple risks Ethiopia faces, a new collective anticipatory action framework for floods will be explored. This is part of OCHA's portfolio of pre-arranged funding of more than \$100 million in 15 countries for storms, floods, droughts and cholera.

As Ethiopia confronts another drought in 2024, more flexible funding for anticipatory action is needed. As Ms. Msuya concluded: "now is the time to scale."



On 12 May 2022 at a UNICEF MY Home/Bete school Dubti, Afar Region, Ethiopia, Ibrahim Ali (left) attends a class designed to provide a safe space for boys and girls living amid humanitarian emergencies by integrating accelerated learning, child protection and skills development. Credit: UNICEF