Step 6: Narrow and prioritize list of early action

Once you have used the methods outlined above prioritize impacts and identify early actions, it is time to determine which actions are most feasible and most likely to reduce suffering and losses.

There is no "right way" to prioritize early actions. There are many criteria that you can apply to assess and rank early actions and to guide you in your selection process. The list below contains criteria other national societies have found helpful in evaluating and prioritizing early actions. Click on the link for examples of how the different criteria could benefit the prioritization of early actions for your EAP. The Validation Committee will explicitly use the following criteria when assessing your (s)EAP:

(1) Evidence base: provide an evidence base for your selected early actions and reference to academic research, empirical studies, interviews with key informants/experts, among other sources of evidence. You may also consult the evidence database, which collates the findings from empirical studies of anticipatory action. While not required for the (s)EAP, you may provide this where it exists.

(2) Feasibility: the implementation process shows that each step of the activation has been thought through and considered and that implementation in the lead time available is possible. The National Society capacity section of the EAP will also ask you demonstrate that the national society has the capacity to deliver the action in terms of operational, thematic and administrative capacity, in terms of alignment with strategies of the NS, and in terms of capacity to advance funds.

(3) No regrets/do no harm: describe how the selected actions contribute to the well-being of the population even if the expected event does not materialize.

(4) Lifespan of prepositioned items: To ensure the feasibility of the rapid distribution of items in the short timeframe between forecast and event, prepositioning of goods may be necessary. Prepositioned items should have a lifetime of at least the lifecycle of the EAP and should only be replenished after an activation.

In addition to these criteria, the following methods may help you to prioritize your early actions:

- (Participatory) Stakeholder workshops
- Early action database
- Evidence database

- Community (or stakeholder) ranking activities

Criteria for selection of early actions:

Policy fit

Scale

Evidence of effectiveness

Feasibility

Social acceptability

Capacity of implementation

Value for money/efficiency

Alignment with organisational mandate and priorities

Timing

Action lifetime

Benefit of acting early

No regret actions

Do no harm/avoid generating new risks

Budgetary constraints regarding prepositioning

Lifetime of prepositioned relief items

Practical guidance: Challenges in prioritizing impacts and actions– verifying and weighing stakeholder perceptions

While key informants have valuable insight into their contexts, people may also have beliefs based upon misinformation or make assumptions about cause and effect and the severity of impacts that are not supported by systematic data. For this reason, you should always seek to verify data from as many data streams as possible (e.g. focus groups and databases). A lack of data does not automatically mean people's observations are wrong, but it is always best to validate stakeholder perceptions using secondary data, when possible.

For example, humanitarians will often prioritize reducing loss of life over other impacts. However, it may be that, overall, the event in question causes few deaths on average. Early warning messages alone may be successful in reducing mortality, and it may be difficult to predict and prevent remaining fatalities. In such cases, the decision to focus early action financing on preventing immediate loss of life may still make sense, but the decision to do so should at least be informed by critical evaluation of actual mortality rates and the likelihood of reducing it. Data on who dies and how will allow for a more informed decision as to whether it is possible to effectively target this impact using early action.

In another example, stakeholders often believe that flooding leads to an increase in diseases (such as cholera), leading to additional hardships such as loss of income or time out from school. National health statistics, however, may reveal that overall caseloads and mortality rates remain the same or are more closely related to other factors. This data could be incomplete; however, they should be presented to stakeholders and considered along with stakeholder perceptions when determining which impacts to address and early actions to take.

If stakeholder priorities are contradicted by evidence, it may be appropriate to try to influence those priorities. When contradictory data does not exist, is not seen as reliable, or is not readily available, it may be necessary to rely more heavily on qualitative data and stakeholder perceptions.

Example of applying the criteria – the process in Mozambique

It is unrealistic to assume there could be a fixed, context-independent order in which criteria can or should be applied. The team in Mozambique found it impossible to apply these criteria in a linear fashion. Instead, they considered potential early actions using an iterative process of narrowing actions, focusing on promising interventions, collecting additional data, and then reconsidering actions considering new knowledge. The discussion below provides examples of how the above criteria were applied in Mozambique to gradually arrive at the most realistic and beneficial early actions.

In Mozambique, certain criteria were particularly useful in immediately reducing the field of potential early actions and focusing future research. These included *policy fit, alignment with organizational mandate and priorities, capacity to implement, and feasibility*.

Policy fit was an essential consideration in Mozambique because, cash transfers – an area of action of particular interest to the FbF community – were explicitly prohibited under Mozambican laws at the time. While cash-transfer actions might be effective in reducing the impacts of floods and cyclones in Mozambique, the team elected not to spend time investigating early actions that would not be possible within the project timeline. If cash-based interventions become an option in the future, further work will be needed to explore feasibility and to develop theories of change.

In Mozambique, two criteria – *alignment with organizational mandate and priorities* and whether CVM had the *capacity to implement* the action–were interrelated. National societies are the default recipients of IFRC anticipation funding. As Red Cross staff and volunteers in Mozambique do not have the experience nor the mandate to attempt to reinforce public infrastructure or power lines, any early actions in these sectors would be better planned by the government transportation authority and funded by other means. For this reason, actions related to reinforcing roads, bridges, and electrical lines were eliminated from consideration early on.

Feasibility is likely to be an essential criterion in any context. If the action cannot be performed given the forecast lead time, it should not be considered. However, if no one has tried your intervention, it may not be immediately clear whether an action could be
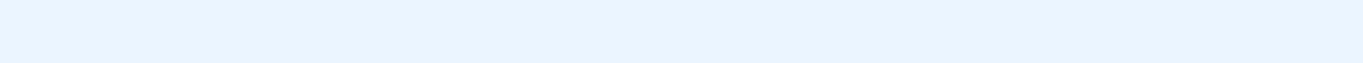
successfully implemented within the given timeframe. This was the case for shelter reinforcements in Mozambique. Because damage to houses is a major impact of cyclones according to historical data and stakeholders at all levels, CVM elected to conduct simulations to see whether the Red Cross volunteers could distribute materials, conduct trainings, and execute the actions within the time afforded by the forecasts.

The *scale* at which action could be successfully set up and executed was also critical in Mozambique. Providing families with evacuation assistance for themselves, their animals, and their belongings might have increased rates of evacuation as well as loss of life and livelihoods, but CVM did not have the capacity to develop transportation agreements for all communities that might be affected by a cyclone. Such an action would be more feasible to set up within specific communities rather than on a national scale, and it was therefore ruled out.

Criteria, such as the *timing* of the action or *social acceptability*, were only applied once other criteria were met. It was determined that helping people to harvest their crops before a storm would be too difficult because it would require setting up cash-for work systems in a short period. In terms of timing, it would also only be a viable action if the flood or hurricane hit late in the growing season. The possibility of deconstructing houses to store and save expensive components only arose in later conversations with experts, therefore the social acceptability at the community level was not explored until later in the process of defining actions.

While demonstrating *evidence of effectiveness* is desirable, because FbF is a relatively new concept, there is little definitive evidence for many actions. Considering this, CVM tried to build an evidence base for FbF shelter reinforcements by testing the intervention in its protocol.

Finally, some criteria were briefly considered but were not useful in the Mozambican context. *Value for money/efficiency*, for example, could only be considered when there was reliable, comparable data regarding the relative costs and effectiveness of different interventions seeking to address the same impact. This data was generally unavailable, but it was factored into decision-making when available. For example, the team considered evidence that installing large water tanks requires higher logistical costs than household distribution water purification kits.

After completing the process of identifying priority impacts, considering each action in relation to the criteria above, eliminating the actions that do not meet key criteria, identifying gaps in knowledge, collecting additional information, and reassessing the options (as many times as necessary) your team will eventually be left with the actions that make the most sense in your context.