

# 07. Select Early Actions

## Summary ↓

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Early actions are at the heart of anticipatory action and of each Early Action Protocol (EAP). The EAP will ask you to demonstrate that the actions proposed will reduce key impacts and are feasible given the forecast lead time. It is therefore critical to devote time and attention to identifying impacts, to prioritizing those that can and should be addressed by FbF, and to identifying and operationalizing early actions that will help at-risk populations mitigate negative impacts. Careful identification, prioritization, and selection of early actions guarantees actions that do the following:

- Reduce priority risks
- Are adapted to the local context
- Are feasible to implement in the lead time before the extreme event with the capacities and resources at hand
- Align with the priorities of communities, local disaster risk management actors (e.g. local governments or NGOs) and relevant preparedness plans
- Fit within government disaster risk management policies and regulations.

This chapter outlines a recursive process for identifying and selecting early actions that will be triggered and automatically funded based on forecast information.

The steps below—implemented iteratively—will help you to answer the following key questions:

- What are the main impacts caused by the hazard in question?
- What early actions will best reduce these impacts (while not creating unintended consequences for recipients and their neighbors)?
- Which of these early actions are currently feasible given the existing context and organizational capacities?

The steps and criteria in this chapter were elaborated particularly to support the selection of early actions for (s)EAPs to be submitted to the anticipatory pillar of DREF and thus correspond to this mechanism's requirements. However, this guidance can also be used by National Societies that aim to develop more localized EAPs or incorporate early

actions in contingency plans and/or response plans with their own funding. If used for other funding mechanisms, the steps and methods described below could be adapted or weighed differently, and some criteria mentioned might be less relevant.

## Step 1: Define your team

If you have not already defined your team, please see [chapter 3, step 3: Put together and onboard a team for FbF development](#). If your team is not already cross-departmental, you may need to engage your national society's experts in WASH, shelter, livelihoods, and other sectors relevant to the early actions you consider.

In addition to your core team, the steps below require consultation with as wide a range of actors as possible, including community residents, community committees, civil society organizations, local and national governments and agencies, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Society branches, other humanitarian and development organizations, research institutions (including the climate science community), and the private sector.

## Step 2: Develop a data collection plan to do the following

Although the steps below are presented sequentially, you will save time and resources by selecting your methods and developing a data collection plan and tools that gather information on all four simultaneously (identifying impacts, prioritizing impacts, identifying and brainstorming early actions, narrowing early actions) or iteratively. Each step below lists and links to methods from [chapter 5](#) that will help you to identify impacts, to understand how stakeholders experience and perceive the severity of these impacts, and to elicit potential early actions. Use the methods in [chapter 5](#) and steps 3-7 below to define a plan for collecting relevant data and testing your results. To help you with writing your EAP, make sure that you document the process of selecting the early actions: who was consulted and how and what other assessments were considered?

See the [toolbox of this chapter](#) or the [toolbox of chapter 5](#) for examples of research plans and templates.



## Practical guidance: Sampling a range of communities

EAPs funded by the DREF do not pre-define communities. National societies decide which communities will receive assistance at the time of activation based on risk and forecast data. Despite this national-level, flexible approach it is important to gather community-level data to ensure that the impacts being addressed, the risk factors, and the support provided are relevant across the area of potential intervention. As you will not be able to consult all exposed or vulnerable communities in your country, you should develop a plan to strategically collect data from the broadest range of communities possible given the resources available. This means paying attention to factors such as geographic location and exposure, the type of housing, differences in agricultural or other livelihood patterns, road access, and other factors relevant to the early actions you are planning. You may not be able to gather all types of data from each community, but by using different tools or data sources (e.g. FGDs, KII, Community visits) in different locations, you will be able to better compare across contexts and assure the relevance of your early actions no matter where activation eventually occurs.

## Step 3: Identify impacts

As the goal of early actions in FbF is to prevent or reduce the humanitarian impact of extreme weather events, it is of crucial importance to understand the impact that the hazard in question causes, how and to whom. If you have not already done so through a [scoping study](#), you should develop a comprehensive list of impacts for the hazard in question. This can be done using a combination of the following methods outlined in [chapter 5](#) of this manual:

- Impact and risk databases
- Literature review

- Key informant interviews
- Focus groups discussions
- (Post-disaster) community visits
- (Participatory) stakeholder workshops.

## Step 4: Prioritize impacts

Once you have developed a comprehensive list of impacts, you must decide which you can and should focus on. The choice of how to prioritize will depend upon your context and needs. While FbF systems can contribute to mitigating some disaster risks that have not been otherwise reduced or managed via long-term disaster risk reduction, it cannot address all potential disaster impacts. To develop realistic and effective EAPs, you will need to prioritize the impacts and select your area of focus. This is an important step, as the selection of impacts will influence the early actions that you design to reduce those impacts as well as the variables for the trigger. For example, if your selected impact is destruction of houses due to strong winds you will need to design early actions that prevent or reduce such destruction. Windspeeds would then be an important variable to monitor for your trigger.

In the EAP, you should be able to clearly state the impacts that you are going to address and explain why. For example, you may prioritize an impact based upon suffering caused to vulnerable populations, overall economic impact, stakeholder priorities (disaster management priorities, national society priorities, community priorities, etc.), organizational capacity and expertise, and/or after considering the selection criteria for early actions presented in [Step 6.1 below](#). As each of these methods yield opportunities, trade-offs, and challenges, a combination is likely most appropriate. The following previously explained methods can support your team's disaster impact prioritization:

- Impact and risk databases
- Literature review
- Semi-structured, key informant interviews
- Focus group discussions
- (Post disaster) Community visits
- (Participatory) Stakeholder workshops
- Surveys

## Step 5: Identify and brainstorm potential early actions

As you begin to understand and prioritize the impacts of most concern and relevance to communities and your national society, you can dig deeper into early actions that might reduce those specific impacts. Be sure to involve experts from relevant sectors, such as shelter, agriculture, WASH, health, or disaster management. The following methods can be used to identify or brainstorm potential early actions:

- Literature review
- Semi-structured, key informant interviews
- Focus group discussions
- (Post disaster) Community visits
- (Participatory) Stakeholder workshops
- Policy and practice reviews
- Early action database
- Community (or stakeholder) ranking activities



### Practical guidance: Brainstorming early actions

In our experience, when brainstorming early actions, stakeholders tend to default to traditional response actions, as that is what they are most familiar with. During workshops, focus group discussions, interviews or other consultations, push participants to think outside the box. This could include proposing new actions or shifting the content and timing of existing actions to make them suitable for anticipatory action.

**Try asking:** are there things you do not currently do, but that you could do (between the forecast and hazard onset/peak) to mitigate impacts if you had additional resources or support? Is this action more effective as an early action or as a response?

## 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.

## Step 7: Develop theories of change

Once you have identified several promising early actions, it is time to operationalize them and test the logic behind those ideas using theories of change. A theory of change (ToC) is a comprehensive illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It means describing step-by-step how and why the desired outcome (in our case reduced humanitarian impact) will be attained by taking the selected early actions. It will help you to visualize, and eventually test whether your early actions are likely to reduce the prioritized impact. Your ToC should also encompass prepositioning and readiness activities that make the early actions possible upon activation. See [chapter 4](#) for more on readiness and prepositioning,

A ToC is often created as a series of “if... then...” statements and then put into a visual representation, like a flowchart (see example below). It helps to think of a ToC as a map on which you mark the spot where you want to go: the desired result or problem solution. Then you draw a route on the map that you think is best to get you from A to B. This is a description of the expected chain of results, from action to solution. Along this route, you will make assumptions. For example, you may have to assume that a particular bridge is passable or that you can cover a certain distance per day. You also note down landmarks you expect to see on your way (intermediate results or milestones). It is important to use all available evidence when building a theory of change, so that every “if... then...” relationship is built on information and evidence rather than conjecture.

A ToC can also be used as a basis for a logframe and monitoring and

evaluation frameworks. Your team should therefore develop a detailed ToC for each early action being considered for inclusion in the protocol. The choice of how many ToCs to develop at this stage will depend upon your team's needs and your process for narrowing and testing your early actions. At the end of this process, your team should have a sound understanding of how and why each action will contribute to your desired results. ToCs for each early action you include in your protocol need to be included in the EAP submitted to the DREF.

The ToC process is a crucial step in your identification of actions, make sure to follow this guidance on steps to take.

## **At least four steps are involved in developing a theory of change:**

### **Step 1**

- Start from a specific goal, meaning the positive change the programme or project seeks to induce to address a problem that has been identified.

*Example:* “Reduce the incidence of diarrheal diseases in vulnerable communities when there is flooding in Exemlandia”.

### **Step 2**

- Map out the process of change, working backwards from the specific goal. Ask: “What is required to bring about this change?” It is useful to do this as a team and consulting relevant and knowledgeable stakeholders.

*Tip:* Note down process steps on post-it notes and put them on a flip chart (see example below). Visualizing a ToC helps team members to understand it more easily and question its logic.

*Example:* Visual representation of a ToC for Exemlandia (see below).

### **Step 3**

- Write a narrative summary expressed as a sequence of logically linked events (“if... then...” statements) and support them with available evidence.

*Example 1:* “If all households in flood-affected communities have 30-days’ worth of water purification tablets and receive information how to use them, then they will purify their drinking water. If they purify all their drinking water, the incidence of diarrheal diseases will decrease.”

*Example 2:* “The ability to deliver water purification tablets is dependent on the assumption that the national society has procured and pre-positioned the necessary supplies and has them ready to be moved and distributed to the population immediately upon activation.”

#### Step 4

- Make implicit assumptions about how changes happen explicit and reference supporting evidence.

*Tip:* Note assumptions on post-it notes in a different color and add them in between the process steps.

*Example 2:* “The ability to deliver water purification tablets is dependent on the assumption that the national society has procured and pre-positioned the necessary supplies and has them ready to be moved and distributed to the population immediately upon activation.”

In the previous example, many assumptions are made that would need to be confirmed by evidence. For example, it is assumed that households understand and appreciate the information they have received about the importance of water purification or that they already have the knowledge and awareness to use purification tablets. But what if pre-existing knowledge about water purification is low?

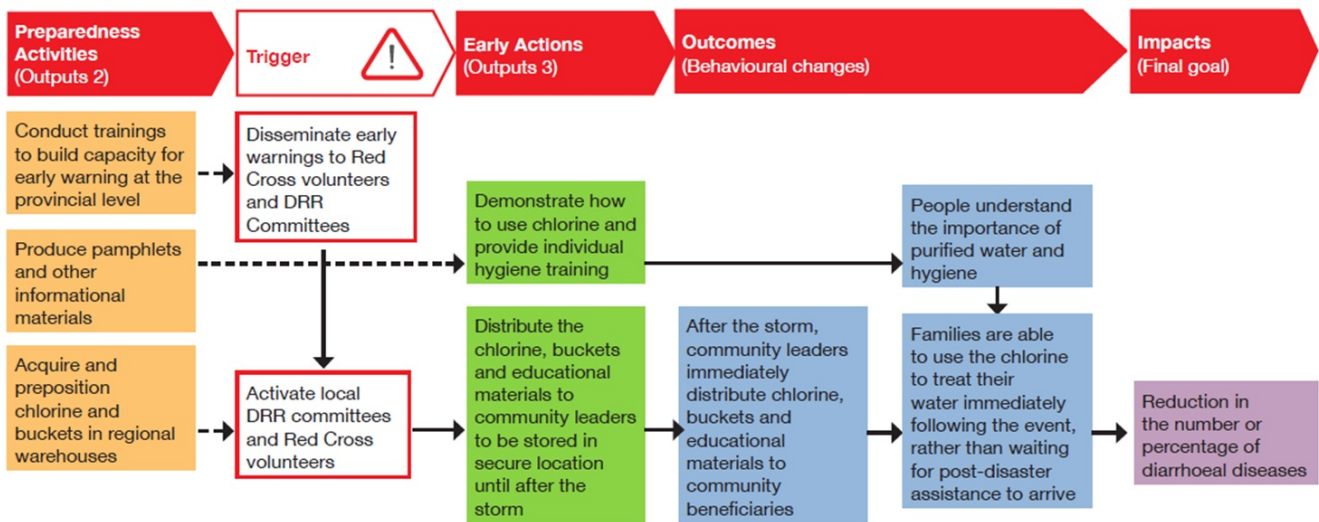
What if written information materials are given to a household whose members cannot read? What if there are community members who speak a different language? What if there are reservations against using blue pills or tablets based on previous bad experiences or rumors? What if households purify their drinking water but they do not purify the water used for washing food items? What if safe hygiene practices are relatively unknown and household members do not wash their hands with soap and water before preparing food and before eating?

All assumptions, as trivial as they may seem, should be made explicit and checked against evidence to see whether they are reasonable or need to be addressed as part of the early action protocol.

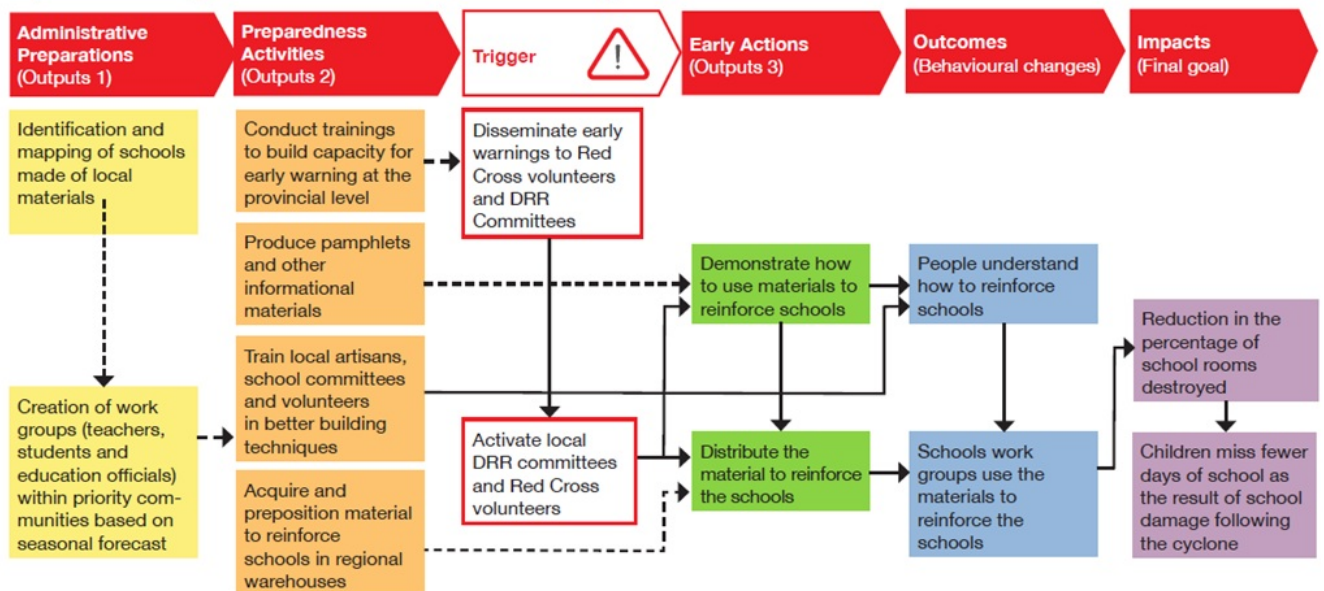
For more detailed guidance on how to develop a ToC, see the ToC presentation in the [toolbox](#).



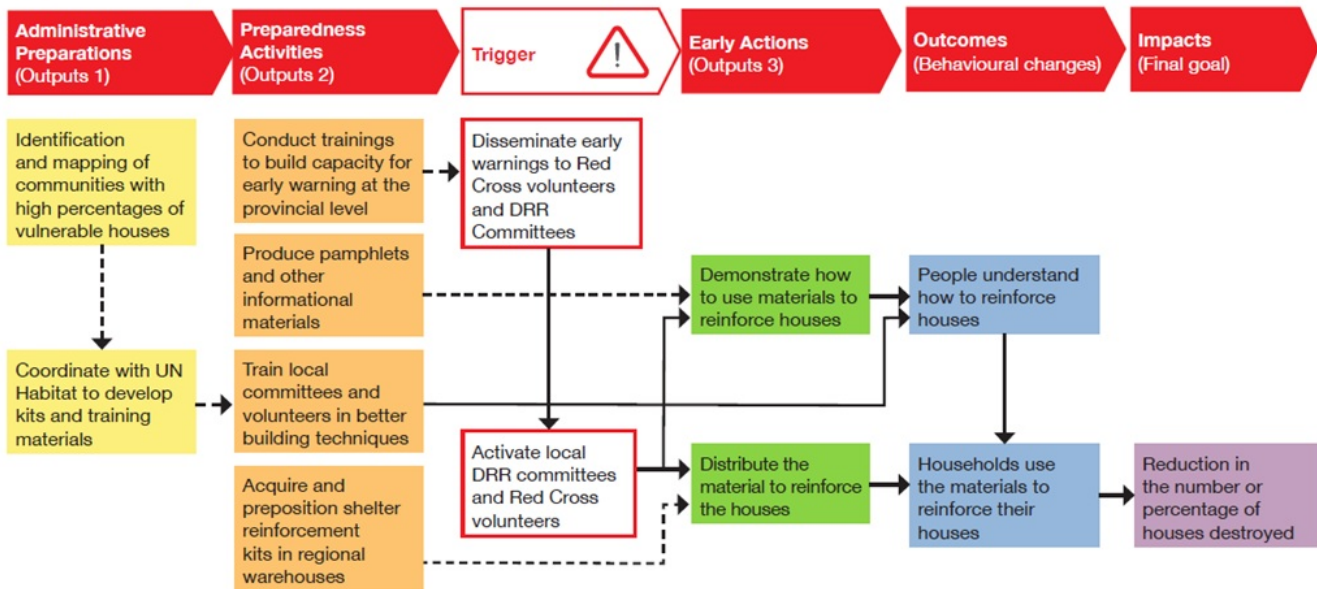
## Cyclone Early action Protocol: Distribution of Chlorine and Buckets



## Cyclone Early action Protocol: Reinforcing Schools



## Cyclone Early action Protocol: Reinforcing Houses

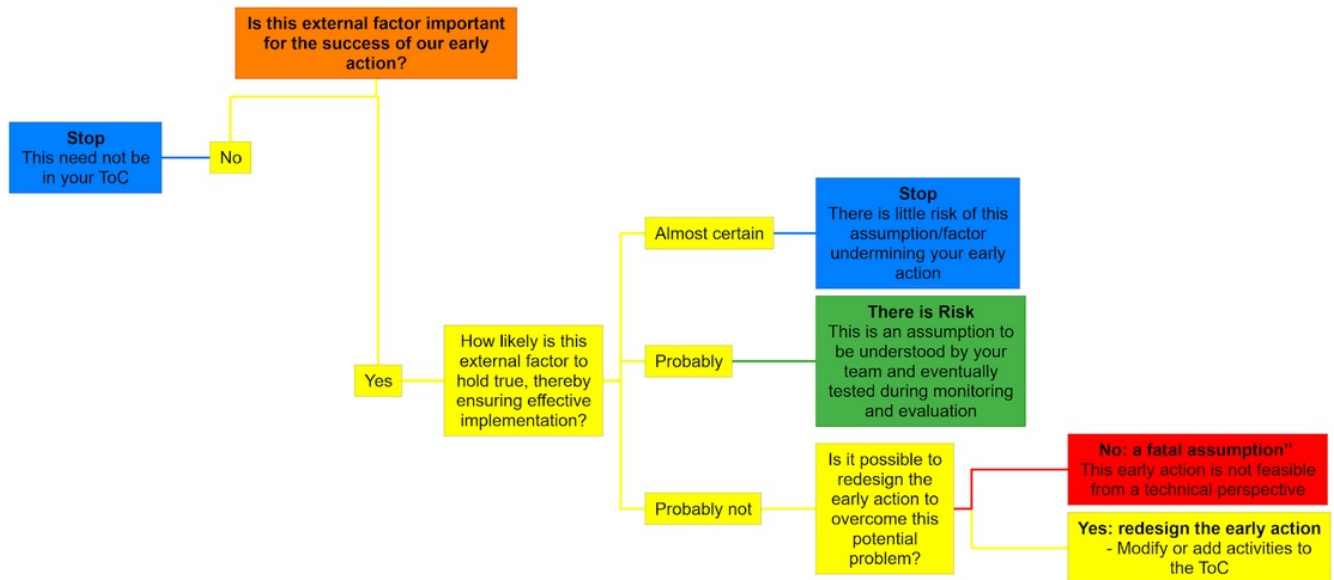


## Step 8: Test or workshop theory of Change

Once your internal team has developed theories of change, it can be useful to test or validate these theories of change with external stakeholders. Perhaps the most important step of this process is making your assumptions explicit and making sure there are not any fatal assumptions to undermine your success. This can be done using the following methods described above:

- Interviews with sector-specific experts
- Stakeholder workshops
- Community consultations

## Fatal Assumptions Decision-tree



## Step 9: Finalize early actions

Based on the external feedback you receive from the consultations in step six, select the early actions to be included in your EAP and finalize the ToCs.

## Step 10: Develop an activation plan for selected actions and test it

Design how, by whom and when the selected early actions will be implemented after a trigger has been reached. Conduct a tabletop exercise, drill, or full simulation (see [chapter 11](#)) to ensure your actions are feasible in the time frame given by the forecast.

## Step 11: Make rationale explicit in the EAP

Once you have made the final selection of early actions to be included in your EAP, including developing and validating your theories of change, it is essential to document how and why you came to the selection you did. Section 5.2 of the EAP requires that you outline which methodologies and data sources you used to identify impacts and actions and to justify how



you came to select the actions in your EAP. This will allow the validation committee to understand why the early actions in your protocol are most likely to mitigate the impacts of the hazard in question on the target population. Being explicit about your rationale will also help those responsible for revisions of the EAP to understand why these actions were selected, to consider what may have changed since those actions were selected, and to decide if the rationale is still valid for future versions of the EAP.

## Final lessons and recommendations

The methods and processes described above can assist you in identifying and selecting early actions. Keep the following suggestions in mind as you apply them to your context.

### **The identification and selection of early actions is an iterative process**

- As indicated above, exploration of early actions is not a linear process. As you narrow in on the most promising actions, new questions may arise. Follow the gaps in your knowledge until you are confident in the actions you are selecting.

### **Keep an open mind**

- The people within your organization may be attached to actions they are familiar with in a response context. Be sure to talk to as many experts and external stakeholders as possible to widen the possibilities.

### **Do not pick something just because you have to**

- It may be that after completing this process there are few, if any, actions that can be properly executed. In such cases, it may be necessary to discuss a way forward with the project sponsors/donors or look for simple actions (such as reinforcing early warning) that can have an impact.

### **Be critical - develop theories of change and test them where possible**

- Developing a clear theory of change will help you to really assess how your action will contribute to reducing the prioritized impact and

whether it can truly be successfully executed given the lead- time available to you. Stakeholders may be overly optimistic (or pessimistic) about the feasibility or effectiveness of a proposed action. Simulations or small-scale pilots are valuable ways of testing your theory of change and operational capacity and will strengthen the quality of your Early Action Protocol Proposal.

### **One criteria is not enough**

- As you can see from the process above, there are many factors to consider when selecting early actions. An action that has proven extremely effective in one place, for example, might be impossible in another because of political, logistical, or other constraints. You must therefore gather evidence for each of these criteria rather than being guided by a single one.

### **Look to existing early actions for inspiration**

- There are a growing number of countries and partners implementing FbF for a range of hazards. Look to other FbF countries for guidance based on existing good practices.

### **Build your own evidence**

- FbF is a new concept. This means that you may identify an action that has not been tested in your circumstances. If your innovative action has the potential to help people and there is sufficient support from the partners involved, it may be worthwhile to test the action and develop your own evidence. This evidence can eventually be shared with the broader FbF community, contributing to the Early Action Database and helping others in the process of identifying and assessing early actions.

### **Involve experts**

- Although community involvement is crucial in the selection of the actions, it is important to include sectoral experts in the brainstorming process to identify the best measures to reduce the prioritized impacts, as some solutions might be innovative that communities at risk might not yet be aware of.





**Make sure early actions apply the principle of *Do No Harm*.**

## Toolbox

### **Theory of change**

[Theory of Change \(English\)](#)  
[Theory of Change \(Spanish\)](#)  
[Evidence Database](#)  
[Early Action Database](#)  
[Decision Tree Fatal Assumptions](#)  
[Theory of change vs. logic models](#)  
[DFID review of the use of 'theory of change'](#)

### **Data collection and post-activation guidance**

[TEMPLATE\\_Data collection methodology planning](#)  
[Mozambique Guidance and Tools for Post-activation Evaluation of the Cyclone Protocol](#)  
[Financiamento baseado em Previsão em Moçambique](#)

### **Other key reads, documents and websites**

[Cash and Voucher Assistance in Bangladesh \(Gros et al.\)](#)  
[Learning for Sustainability](#)  
[Anticipatory action in the age of Covid-19: lessons from Cyclone Amphan in Bangladesh](#)