

Step 4: Narrow and prioritize list of early actions

Once you have used the methods outlined above to identify and prioritize the impacts that can be addressed by FbF, and have gathered a list of potential early actions to address them, it is time to determine which actions are most promising to reduce suffering and losses.

While stakeholder priorities are an essential consideration, they are only one criteria for an effective early action. There are many other criteria that can be applied in order to best assess and rank early actions. There is no “right way” to prioritize early actions, however the following criteria below should be considered during the selection process. Also bear in mind that some of them (e.g. feasibility, evidence, scale, capacity, lifetime of relief items) are contained in the minimum criteria for EAPs of the FbA by the DREF. Click on the link for examples of how the different criteria could benefit the prioritization of early actions for your EAP.

Criteria for selection of early actions:

Policy Fit

Is the action consistent with government and/or other institutional contingency plans?

Example of Policy Fit: Cash transfers in Mozambique

When the cyclone EAP was being developed in Mozambique, the National Institute for Disaster Management – the government agency overseeing disaster response – did not allow cash transfers. This meant that although cash transfers could theoretically have been used to mitigate many cyclone impacts before a storm hits, the National Society could not include such actions in the EAP. Following cyclone Idai in March 2019, the government is making changes to these policies. This means that cash transfers may be an option for the flood EAP or for future versions of the cyclone EAP.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Is there evidence that the action would be effective in reducing the prioritized impact(s)?

Examples of Evidence of Effectiveness:

Mozambique

In Mongolia, the Mongolia Red Cross assisted 2,000 herder households with unrestricted cash grants of USD 100 in December 2017 and with animal care kits delivered to the pastoralists in January 2018. Research showed that a FbF activation in anticipation of extreme winter and

drought conditions known as Dzud was effective in reducing livestock mortality by roughly 50% and increased offspring survival rates by providing tailored animal care kits and a small unconditional cash grant.

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Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, a test intervention in 2017 demonstrated that families who received cash transfers ahead of floods accrued significantly less high-interest debt, otherwise a common coping strategy, and experienced less psychosocial stress during and after the flood period; they also had more reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food.

Scale

Can this action be set up and implemented at the desired scale?

Example of scaling

Uganda

In Uganda the first FbF project focused on a small geographical area, after test activations and further analysis, it was acknowledged that FbF systems for National Societies are most effective if they can be implemented anywhere, that a forecast predicts severe impact (using impact-based forecasting information). For example, if a flood is forecasted for a river basin, through impact-based forecasting the NS should know for which communities the expected impact is most severe and act accordingly. Given this approach, it is essential to understand if the national society has the capacity to implement the selected early action in all the potential locations that can be impacted.

Feasibility

Is there evidence that the action is feasible?

Two key aspects of feasibility are:

Time required:

- Is it possible to execute the action effectively with the given forecast lead-time?

Access considerations:

- Are there any factors (road or travel conditions, conflict/security, social tensions) that could interfere with access to the communities and hence successful implementation?

Examples of Feasibility (Testing timing and logistical considerations through simulations) can be found [here](#).

The capacity of the NS is also closely linked to feasibility.

Social Acceptability

Is the proposed action something the community will support?

Example of Social Acceptability: Taking houses apart before a storm

Some actions, while effective, might not be something communities are willing to engage in. During conversations with shelter experts, it was suggested that deconstructing houses and storing the most valuable components, such as windows, doors, and metal roofing, might be a good way to reduce losses during cyclones or floods. An action such as this can only be effective if the community also believes the work it entails is worth the potential risk or reward. When the CVM team conducted focus groups, one high-risk community was already doing something similar, however, many others felt that such an action was too time consuming and was unlikely to be effective. If only a few communities are likely to cooperate with your early action, it is unlikely to be successful overall. Therefore, before including actions that might meet community resistance in your EAP, it is essential to consult with a large sample of potential beneficiaries to ensure the action is socially acceptable.

Capacity of Implementation

Does the NS have the institutional capacity (thematic, logistic, administrative, financial, human resource, chapter) to implement the action effectively given the lead time and scale?

Value for Money/Efficiency

How does the cost for the action compare to the expected (or proven) benefit? Are there other actions that could achieve the same impact for less?

Example of Value for Money/Efficiency: Water tanks vs. individual supplies for water purification

In some instances, there may be more than one way to attempt to mitigate the impact in question. In this case, it may make sense to compare the efficiency of different courses of action in order to determine which provides the higher value overall. When trying to ensure that communities or households have access to safe water after an extreme event in one FbF country, for example, it is possible to set up community water points or to distribute water purification kits to individual households. A review of the existing literature suggested that setting up tanks at the community level was likely to be more resource intensive, and possibly create more obstacles to consistent use, than providing individual households with kits. The NS in that case therefore decided to provide kits instead of setting up larger tanks to provide the whole community with water.

Alignment with organizational mandate and priorities

Does the National Society or other organization implementing FbF early actions have the mandate, expertise, and authority to implement the action?

Example of alignment: The Red Cross does not have expertise in protecting roads

Timing

Is the action beneficial at any time of the year, or does it depend on when the event occurs?

Example of Timing: Harvesting crops before a flood

Some actions, while potentially very beneficial and effective, may only be possible during a very short window of time. For example, harvesting crops to save them before they are damaged may only be relevant/effective if the event occurs when crops are close to harvest. Because a cyclone or flood may hit at any time during the season, the team in Mozambique decided not to include this in their EAP. Another option might also have been to make certain actions dependent upon the precise timing or season, only activating those actions when the timing would make sense. The potential benefit of such seasonal actions would then have to be weighed against the administrative and readiness costs of preparing for many different early actions.

Action lifetime

How long will the action benefit people?

When planning your action, it is essential to consider how long the action can and should benefit the people. For example, if you intend to distribute water purification kits so that people have access to clean water immediately after the event until normal response arrives, you need to consider how long such a response will usually take. If not, people may run out and have to resort to drinking dirty water anyway, rendering your action ineffective.

There are also other elements to consider regarding the action lifetime. In the case of materials to reinforce shelters, it is probably unrealistic to assume that materials distributed during one cyclone season will be available for use in the next season. Mosquito nets, on the other hand, have an average life of 3 years in many contexts. If your activity is contingent upon specific training or skills to be effective, how long can people be expected to remember what they learn? Determine how long you need your materials or actions to benefit people and adjust your actions accordingly.

Benefit of acting early

How long until the action has benefit? Is early action necessary to get the benefit, or could the action be done after the event?

Example: timing of early actions to take effect

Depending on the early action, although it may be able to be executed quickly, the time for it to take effect might take longer. For example, vaccinating alpacas in Peru to reduce cold wave mortality will begin to take effect already after a few days, so before the impact of cold and wind on their health gets too severe and before response usually reached the remote villages. Whereas, in cases where it takes weeks after a disaster for people to feel the effects you are seeking to reduce, traditional response might be more efficient and easier to target. On the other hand, if certain areas are known to be cut-off from supply routes after an event occurs, early action may still be beneficial even in these cases and reduce the need for air support or complicated logistics. If the action can be executed just as efficiently and effectively through existing early warning and response systems or immediately following an event there may be no reason to risk acting in vain.

No regret actions

Will people still benefit from the action even if the event does not occur?

It is the nature of FbF that sometimes the forecast event will not occur as expected or will deviate to a new location. For this reason, you may end up “acting in vain.” The EAP will ask you to consider how your proposed actions might help people even if a disaster does not strike. Materials from a shelter kit, for example, might be repurposed or used for repairs. Water purification materials can be kept for a future flood event. Because people can use unrestricted cash for whatever they choose, households will find a use for it no matter how the situation unfolds.

Be aware of the linkages between acting in vain and NS credibility. For example, repeatedly performing large-scale evacuations in vain, might not be beneficial over time.

Do no harm / avoid generating new risks

Will the selected action be in line with the principle of Do No Harm? Will the selected action create new risk?

Lifetime of prepositioned relief items

An approved EAP under the FbA by the DREF remains valid until the first activation or for a maximum of five years, when it will have to be revised and resubmitted. If the early actions you are considering depend on the use of prepositioned goods, it is important that these items do not perish before the five years are over.

Example Peru:

In a first project phase it was tested to distribute hay and veterinary kits to herder families in the Andes, as one of the priority impacts that had been identified for coldwaves was that alpaca herders lost their livestock, because alpacas lacked access to food (grass) and were susceptible to diseases. However, the hay and also the alternative option of dried concentrated food would have needed to be prepositioned to ensure availability at short notice and both items’ lifetimes were less than five years, so ultimately they could not be considered in the EAP; as there was a risk they would have spoilt before the EAP was activated.

Budgetary constraints regarding prepositioning

Depending on the hazard, there are only few days between activation and the extreme event occurring. If early actions depend on particular relief items that cannot be procured on short notice, prepositioning might be necessary. However, FbA by the DREF only allows for 40% of the EAP budget to be used for prepositioning. Hence, if your early action consists in prepositioning of items for an amount that go beyond this percentage, either different early actions need to be identified, or stocks financed by other sources or other procurement arrangements (e.g. virtual warehouses) made.



Practical Guidance 7: Evidence of effectiveness

The quantity and quality of evidence for potential early actions varies greatly. Some interventions, such as water purification and mosquito nets, have been tested in a variety of humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts. Many, however, have not been tested as forecast-based early actions (implemented in the short window of time before an extreme event).

In such cases, evidence from effectiveness in other contexts can be used to extrapolate potential effectiveness as an early action. For example, if an action is difficult to execute properly over a longer timeframe, it is unlikely to be viable for short-term implementation.

Although still limited, there is a growing volume of evidence and studies about the effectiveness of certain early actions. The M&E working group on FbF/Anticipatory Action is consolidating all this evidence, which can soon be accessed by any national society, via the Anticipation Hub platform.

A complete list of search terms and the systematic review protocol used by the research team in Mozambique is available [here](#). Any evidence found for the various early actions considered in Mozambique can also be found in the “evidence” column of the Global Potential Early Action Database. Approved EAP summaries with an overview of different early actions can be also found on the [IFRC FbA by the DREF website](#).



Practical Guidance 8: Applying the criteria – The process in Mozambique

One of the key lessons from the experience in Mozambique is that 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 in light of new knowledge. The discussion below provides examples of how the above criteria were applied in Mozambique to gradually narrow in on 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 have been 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. Cash-based actions are nevertheless included in the Potential Early Action Database, and 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. Because the Red Cross was pre-determined to be the forecast-based actor in Mozambique, these two conditions must be met for the action to be successful. For this reason, actions related to reinforcing roads, bridges, and electrical lines, for example, were eliminated from consideration early on. As the Red Cross 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.

Feasibility is likely to be an essential criteria 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 before, 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 or not the Red Cross volunteers could distribute materials, conduct trainings, and execute the actions within the time afforded by the forecasts.

The *scale* at which the action could be successfully set up and executed was also an essential consideration. For example, while providing families with evacuation assistance for themselves, their animals, and their belongings might have significantly reduced the number of people who choose to stay in harm's way as well as their loss of life and livelihoods, CVM did not have the capacity to create the necessary agreements for all communities across the country, where a

cyclone might hit. Such an action would be more feasible to set up within specific communities rather than at a national scale.

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 of time and would only be a viable action if the flood or hurricane hit late in the growing season. The possibility of deconstructing houses in order 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 some criteria, such as *evidence of effectiveness*, were highly desirable, because FbF is a relatively new concept there is little existing evidence for many actions. In light of 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 particularly 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.