

Learning from Missed Opportunities to Activate Early Action Protocols

2020-2025

Background

Red Cross Red Crescent Early Action Protocols (EAPs) facilitate anticipatory action to reduce humanitarian losses and suffering by enabling National Societies to mobilize resources, staff, and communities before disaster strikes to protect lives, livelihoods, and assets once predefined trigger thresholds are reached. In the process of developing these EAPs, National Societies build the knowledge and capacity to monitor hazards and evaluate risks as they evolve so that they can act ahead of a threat to mitigate humanitarian impacts. Between 2020 and 2025, 39 EAPs were successfully triggered, enabling National Societies to deliver assistance ahead of predictable shocks. However, there were also cases where, despite extensive investment in risk analysis, hazard monitoring, and planning early actions - and despite credible evidence or warning of impending events - National Societies were unable to act in advance of a threat to reduce humanitarian impacts. These missed activations (see Figure 1 for definition) represent unrealized opportunities to protect at-risk communities first and foremost, as well as

missed opportunities to test systems and demonstrate anticipatory approaches.

Thanks to the support of German Red Cross and Netherlands Red Cross, IFRC commissioned this study to identify cases of missed activation and to understand why activations did not occur when credible evidence suggested an imminent threat of a hazard for which National Societies had invested in anticipatory action. The objectives were to generate recommendations to improve anticipatory action systems and to help the IFRC-DREF provide efficient and adapted funding mechanisms to the National Societies. In consultation with National Societies, the research team sent out a survey to the Movement to identify missed activations. Twenty-one cases were reported between 2020 and 2025. Subsequently, the team conducted 14 key informant interviews with 18 informants involved in 19 of the 21 cases. This brief summarizes the findings of the study.

[1] For two cases, no interviewees were available within the study timeframe.

	Hazard event occurred			No hazard event		
	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Trigger reached	Activation according to EAP (worthy action)	Non-activation, but alternative actions were taken (worthy action)	Non-activation with no actions (fail to act)	Activation according to EAP (action in vain)	Non-activation, but alternative actions were taken (action in vain)	Non-activation with no actions (worthy inaction; lucky miss)
Trigger not reached	Non-activation according to EAP (fail to act)			Non-activation according to EAP (worthy inaction)		

Figure 1: Missed activations included in this study are highlighted in orange.

Findings

The interviews revealed eight factors within four domains (information flow, forecast and trigger, operations and resources, and decisions and governance) contributing to missed activations from 2020-2025. They also revealed one instance of contextual reassessment: the decision not to activate was justified based on updated risk analysis (Figure 2).

Reasons for missed activations: Frequency and case detail (n=19)

Shading reflects cell count (darker = higher); Total row/column shown in grey

	INFORMATION FLOW	FORECAST AND TRIGGER		OPERATIONS AND RESOURCES			DECISION AND GOVERNANCE			TOTAL
	MONITORING/ COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN	TRIGGERS NOT MET	TRIGGERS MET TOO LATE	FUND TRANSFER DELAY	INCOMPLETE READINESS/ PROCUREMENT	OPERATIONAL INFEASIBILITY	LEADERSHIP/ DECISION- MAKING FAILURE	EAP INACTIVE/ RE-EVALUATION, APPROVAL PENDING	CONTEXTUAL RE- ASSESSMENT (NO HUMANITARIAN RISK)	By reason
Primary Reason	4	3	5	—	—	3	1	2	1	19
Secondary Reason	—	—	1	5	3	2	1	—	—	12
Floods (n=6)	2	—	2	2	2	2	1	1	—	12
Tropical Cyclone (n=8)	2	—	4	3	—	1	1	1	—	12
Drought (n=1)	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Cold wave (n=1)	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Heatwave (n=2)	—	1	—	—	1	1	—	—	1	4
Epidemic (n=1)	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
By case type	4	3	6	5	3	5	2	2	1	31

Fewer mentions More mentions

Note: hazard-row totals (bottom) and reason-column totals (right) sum the Floods–Epidemic breakdown, which combines primary and secondary reasons per case (31 total mentions across 19 cases, since some cases have both a primary and a secondary reason). Primary Reason total = 19 (one per case); Secondary Reason total = 12 (cases with a contributing reason).

Figure 2: Primary and secondary reasons for missed activation

The most common reasons for missed activation were associated with trigger monitoring, communication, or thresholds. This includes the threshold being reached but too late to activate and four instances in which communication broke down between the forecasting entity and the National Society. In a few instances, official triggers were not met because of rapid intensification or because the events did not align with historical impact patterns but nevertheless resulted in humanitarian impact. In those cases, National Societies have completed or are considering revisions to the triggers.

While less common, National Societies also faced challenges related to operations and resources, as well as to decisions and governance. The most common of these were delays in revalidating EAPs and decision-making bottlenecks because of the absence or unavailability of key staff, while incomplete readiness activities contributed as a secondary factor.

In several instances, triggers were met or partially met, but the National Society was unable to activate because of insecurity or geographical factors (terrain, distance) preventing them from reaching the population at risk. In at least one case, persistent insecurity means that the highest-risk populations are likely to be consistently unreachable.

Although not the primary reasons for missed activation, the results also point to secondary factors that influenced the decision not to activate, including concerns that IFRC funding would not reach the country and branch offices in time and inconsistent support from IFRC delegations.

The results also indicate that even when full activations did not take place, many National Societies explored the possibility of undertaking other actions either before or after the hazard event.

Recommendations

Figure 3 summarizes the eight primary recommendations emerging from this study and the ways in which they will be addressed.

Signed agreements with forecasting agencies and financial service providers (FSP) (Rec 1) and including staff holiday and weekend scenarios in the SOPs (Rec 2) are important to avoid malfunctioning information flows or other process breakdowns. Going forward, the Validation Committee, IFRC, and National Societies will address these issues by ensuring that the EAP and SOPs provide for these agreements and for simulations of holiday and weekend scenarios, and National Societies and IFRC will confirm that the agreements have been completed during the first annual readiness check. Guidance based on recommendations 3-4 and 6-7 has already been

included in the updated [Anticipatory Action Manual](#). Scenarios covering holidays and weekends, events or locations that will affect fewer people than projected in the EAP, or incomplete readiness (Recs 1-2, 5-6) will also be included in simulation exercises, to help National Societies practice adjusting their protocols in real time. Recommendations 2 and 4-7 will be incorporated into a short training video series intended to supplement existing guidance (e.g. the Anticipatory Action Manual & EAP template) and instruct National Societies how to proceed in unexpected activation situations. In addition to the shorter-term measures described above, recommendations 3-5 and 7 will all be incorporated into the EAP 2.0. The recommendation to allow several forecast sources (Rec 8) will only be addressed through design of the EAP 2.0.

The following recommendations will also be addressed in ways not reflected in Figure 3:

- ▶ A one-page, step-by-step guidance note rephrasing the minimum targets and clarifying options for partial activations (Rec 5) will be developed and eventually included in the manual.
- ▶ To ensure readiness and prepositioning are complete before the hazard season in question (Rec 6), IFRC Information Management and Regional teams are testing an El Niño risk watch to monitor triggers and contribute to informing National Societies of upcoming seasonal threats.
- ▶ To clarify the revision process and prevent delays in incorporating lessons learned into a revised EAP (Rec 7), IFRC has updated the lessons learned methodology to include additional days for collaborative writing and revision of the EAP.

By working together to implement these recommendations, IFRC, National Societies and the Validation Committee can reduce the number of missed activations going forward, thereby increasing the number of at-risk people who receive assistance before predictable shocks. We also

Based on these findings, IFRC recommends that National Societies do the following while writing and maintaining their EAPs:

- ▶ Sign agreements with forecast agencies and FSPs that cover weekend and holiday scenarios;
- ▶ Develop activation SOPs that outline what to do in case of weekend or holiday activation or if key personnel are unavailable;
- ▶ Check that readiness and prepositioning are complete and up to date before each hazard season;
- ▶ Budget for additional writing workshop days to incorporate lessons learned into a new EAP immediately following the lessons learned workshop.

conclude that it is useful to regularly conduct a missed activation analysis across countries and hazards, as missed activations are not captured by the usual monitoring and evaluation that takes place after an activation.

#	Recommendation	Checked at validation	Year-1 readiness check & annual report	Update guidance/ material	Include scenario in simulation/ training	Short video	EAP 2.0 design
1	Ensure that a signed agreement is in place with the forecast agency and FSPs (where relevant) that covers weekends and holidays, is up to date and includes contact details and conditions/modality for sharing the forecast or transferring funds	✓	✓		✓		
2	Develop activation SOPs that include: weekend and holiday coverage; up-to-date contacts; roles and responsibilities for all functions, including senior leadership; and clarification of partial activation and trigger flexibility	✓	✓		✓	✓	
3	Include in the trigger requirement that the source of forecast must be reliable and able to consistently produce and share the trigger information			✓			✓
4	Clarify the ability to request exceptional approval if trigger threshold seems too high and the NS feels the need to activate under a lower threshold (i.e. can demonstrate likely impact at this lower threshold based on information not available at the time of the development of the EAP)			✓		✓	✓
5	Clarify the option for partial activation and rephrase the minimum targeted people				✓	✓	✓
6	Ensure that EAP processing, readiness and stock procurement and prepositioning are completed before the hazard season			✓	✓	✓	
7	Clarify what is expected for the revision after an activation (i.e. light and quick unless major blockers and updates have been identified)	✓		✓		✓	✓
8	Allow the use of several forecast sources in case one is underperforming, or allow flexibility if including several sources of forecast in the EAP is too complicated						✓

Figure 3: Summary of recommendations and follow-through