

Current El Niño October 2009

The El Niño event that began in May 2009 is currently still in progress. Although this El Niño event is being labeled 'weak-to-moderate' the strength of an El Niño event does not necessarily indicate the severity of the impact. For example, this year the weak-to-moderate El Niño diminished the Indian Monsoon to a much greater extent than the very strong El Niño event of 1997-98 did.

Although El Niño is a natural part of climate variability it can be disruptive to many parts of the world, because it can result in some areas receiving too much rainfall and other areas receiving too little. Globally, El Niño typically effects Africa, Asia/Pacific and the America's the most. If you are wondering how El Niño might affect your area consider the information below:

What is El Niño and what does it mean for the RC/RC?

El Niño refers to unusual warming of the waters in the eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean (off the coast of Peru) that happens once every 3-7 years (the opposite is La Nina). Since this unusual warming tends to peak around Christmas time, Peruvians named the phenomenon "El Niño," which means *boy child* in Spanish, and refers to the Christ child.

Scientists and society alike take note when an El Niño develops, because widespread warming of waters in this region of the Pacific can cause trade winds to weaken or even change direction, often leading to shifts in rainfall patterns. During an El Niño year, these shifts in rainfall patterns can mean that some parts of the globe become more likely to receive levels of rainfall they are not used to, either too much or too little. In other words: for many regions, the likelihood of unusual rainfall conditions increases during El Niño years. El Niño events typically initiate between the months of May-August, peak around December-February, and dissipate over the course of the following April-June.

For the RC/RC, this means we need to closely monitor early warnings for our respective regions, in case of an increased risk of too much or too little rainfall. During the rainy season in particular, conditions that are drier or wetter than normal can impact health, food security, livelihoods, and the need for disaster preparedness and response. While these warnings are not guarantees that a particular disaster will strike, knowing in advance if your region is likely to experience unusual rainfall can be a useful guide to help prepare for potential impacts. (More info on monitoring early warnings below).

Recommendations for Action:

If over the coming months El Niño conditions persist, and seasonal precipitation (rainfall) forecasts for your region indicate a higher risk of abnormal rainfall, **you may want to consider planning for improved preparedness.**

Depending on the forecast, you'll want to consider the implications. What would too much or too little rainfall mean in terms of food security, health, disaster management, displacement and livelihoods? Who is vulnerable? What can be done to prepare? What kind of 'no-regrets' actions could be taken early on, that would help to manage these impacts? Are your contingency plans adequate and up to date? Are your relief stocks sufficient for probable demands? When was the last time that staff and volunteers

received training on disaster management? Should you meet with staff to discuss the situation and collectively brainstorm possible courses of action? Answering these questions may become more necessary if expected conditions become more threatening. Thinking through these ideas with your colleagues is always a good idea. That way you can monitor conditions and forecasts for the hours, days and week ahead, to see if and when it becomes necessary to activate the plans and resources you've put in place.

Follow the next three steps to monitor the development of potentially threatening conditions in your region:

1. Monitor monthly El Niño forecasts to follow the development of the event.

Over the coming months, scientists will have a better sense of the event is likely to persist, which can be helpful in informing some regions about the potential impacts that they will experience. However, remember that not all El Niño events are the same and the strength of an El Niño event does not necessarily indicate the severity of the impact experienced in a particular region. **Since knowing the magnitude of an El Niño event does not necessarily inform you of the impacts that will result, it is extremely important to also follow recommendation #2 (below).**

2. Monitor seasonal precipitation (rainfall) forecasts.

Regular monitoring of seasonal forecasts is an important practice, but this event gives you an added incentive to do so: You want to know how *this* El Niño and other current factors in the climate system are likely to affect your region! Seasonal precipitation forecasts can tell you how likely it is that your region will experience below-normal (drier than usual), normal or above-normal (wetter than usual) rainfall conditions, during the next three months. Furthermore, seasonal forecasts are generally more skillful during El Niño (and La Niña) events.

See the case study from West and Central Africa on their use of seasonal forecasts for flood preparedness at: <http://www.climatecentre.org/site/publications/212/west-africa-report-on-early-warning-early-action>

3. Contact local meteorological services/regional information providers for more information on how El Niño events typically affect your region & know what rainfall has already been received.

It is important to know the most likely impacts of an El Niño on your country and these partners may provide you with localized information and forecasts. This could include data on past impacts of El Niño.

The other thing that you can do is keep an eye on how much rainfall has already been received. For example if very little rainfall has already been received in the past months and the forecast for the November-January period is for the high likelihood of below average rainfall there is a higher chance that drought conditions will develop. Likewise, if high amounts of rainfall have already been received and there is high ground saturation, more rainfall forecast could increase the incidence of flooding or landslides.

The language that experts sometimes use can be scientific and complicated but don't be intimidated. Experts need to be challenged to explain things clearly and simply. Keep asking them questions. You are the expert on Red Cross/Red Crescent responsibilities. In addition, the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) has recently opened a helpdesk to provide the RC/RC with assistance in interpreting climate

information relevant to the RC/RC's work. To seek assistance from this source please contact ifrc@iri.columbia.edu.

Monitoring Resources:

- For global forecasts on the likelihood of above average rainfall in the coming 6 days:
<http://ingrid.ldeo.columbia.edu/maproom/.IFRC/.Forecasts/>
- For more information and to monitor El Niño forecasts:
<http://portal.iri.columbia.edu/portal/server.pt?open=512&objID=491&mode=2&cached=true>
- To monitor seasonal rainfall forecasts-
<http://portal.iri.columbia.edu/portal/server.pt?open=512&objID=944&PageID=0&cached=true&mode=2&userID=2>