

Using Climate Forecasts for Early Action to Save Lives in the West/Central Africa Zone

In 2007 West and Central Africa suffered from some of the worst floods in decades, affecting more than 800,000 people, destroying homes, infrastructure and crops, and killing over 300 people. Not only were the 2007 floods devastating, they caught humanitarian agencies off-guard. Yet meteorological organizations and climate scientists had forecasted the above-normal precipitation for the region well in advance. In an effort to avoid repeated devastation of the 2007 floods, the West/Central Africa Zone of the IFRC formed a partnership, facilitated by the RC/RC Climate Centre, with the African Centre for Meteorological Applications for Development (ACMAD) and the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) at Columbia University.

When the WCAZ received forecasts in May 2008 that the upcoming rainy season was likely to be above-normal for the region, the zone took a number of unprecedented actions. These actions included: pre-positioning of relief items, improving disaster response capacity through trainings, developing flood contingency plans, and launching of pre-emergency funding requests. This early warning to early action (EW>EA) approach saved lives, by helping flood prone communities remove themselves and their property from harms way, as well as by dramatically decreasing the amount of time that beneficiaries had to wait for life saving assistance from the Red Cross. Disaster Managers from the WCAZ report that EW>EA transformed the position of Red Cross in the region, to now be considered a key player in disaster response.

With the onset of global climate change, the Federation must be ready for the increasing occurrence of extreme weather events like intense precipitation. The 2008 actions of the WCAZ provide a model for the Movement to improve and scale-up the use of climate information, allowing translation of early warnings into early action for better disaster management and response. Some of the great ways the WCAZ utilized seasonal forecasts for life saving early action include:

- Employing “no-regrets” strategies to focus and plan for probable (but not certain) events.
- Monitoring forecasts on multiple time-scales, to reduce uncertainty in longer-term outlooks.
- Consulting multiple sources of forecast information for greater scientific consensus.
- Utilizing tools that combined the seasonal precipitation forecast with hydrology for flood risk mapping (important since a precipitation forecast is not a flood forecast).
- Holding a meeting with key stakeholders to develop preparedness strategies.
- Issuing the first-ever Preliminary Emergency Appeal, and initiating changes that now make funds from the Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF) available for preparedness activities.

A full report on how the WCAZ used climate information in 2008, including lessons learned, concrete benefits, and recommendations for future implementation of EW>EA will be released on the Climate Centre website next month.