



The RELPA Guide to Early Response to Slow-onset crises

or

“How to make contingency
planning useful, in just fifteen
easy steps”



This is the first version of the RELPA Guide to Early Response to Slow-onset Crises. It is based on a conceptual approach developed for PACAPS workshops in Addis Ababa and Nairobi in January 2008. It is designed to be useful for a wide range of actors: implementing agencies (local Government, national Ministries and NGOs); agencies supporting early warning, to help them ensure that their information leads to earlier response; and donor agencies, to help them in to know at which stage in a crisis, and on the basis of which information, they can best make decisions to ensure timely response of the interventions they wish to support.

This first version has not been field tested. We would like to receive feedback and suggestions from users by March 2009, so that we can produce an improved version of this guide by the project end date of May 2009. Please send any comments or feedback to Simon Levine at simon_levine@yahoo.co.uk or to Mohammed Abdinoor of Save the Children (UK) at abdinoor.m@scuk.org.et. Should you want an electronic version, please send a request to Simon Levine at the above email address.

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We are happy to encourage the free copying and free distribution of this guide, provided that this page, giving due acknowledgements, is included in any copy.

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Note: You can use the guide to help ensure faster response to sudden onset crises too – in fact it is even easier. You just omit a few of the steps. Steps 1 and 2, 5-7, 8 and 13, and of course 15 will be the most important for sudden onset crises.

1. Identify the likely hazards

You can't plan for everything. Fortunately, you don't need to. This is partly because the number of hazards which you are likely to face is usually quite small. But it is also because the lessons you learn in preparing for one hazard usually mean you will be well prepared for most other hazards as well. Choose the two most likely hazards and start there. If you have time, you can always plan for a third and fourth eventuality later. But don't let a fourth possible hazard delay your preparation for the first.

Don't spend weeks trying to decide which hazards to plan for. And don't make your hazards too complex ('a drought at the same time as a war and an epidemic of rinderpest') unless you have good reason to think that what you are describing is really very likely. Simply identify the most likely potential hazards which will have a serious impact on people's livelihoods. Keep it simple and realistic. Choose 'normal' levels of hazard rather than extreme ones, (e.g. the kind of drought or level of conflict that is seen every few years, and not the most serious which has occurred in the past 20 years). Of course, if you are planning when a crisis is already looming, then use the best predictions of how that is likely to turn out.

Go beyond the 'title' of the hazard. You can't plan very effectively for 'livestock epidemics' in general. You can plan more effectively if you think of the kind of epidemic, when and where it may strike, and so on. It is often tempting not to be too specific because we don't know exactly what hazard will strike. However, it won't matter if the hazard you end up responding to is different from the one you described. Your plan will guide your response, you won't be following it blindly. Once you know how the real life situation is different from your scenario, it is relatively easy to adapt your plan. This is certainly much easier than starting your response without having had a plan.

References

Livelihood baseline profiles using the household economy approach can be found at the following web addresses:

for Ethiopia: www.dppc.gov.et/Livelihoods/livelihoodhome.htm

for Somalia: www.fsasomali.org

for NE Kenya: www.savethechildren.org.uk

Livelihood studies using different approaches may also be found, but will have to be sourced from individual agencies, until a central repository for all livelihood studies and assessments can be found.

For further information on the livelihood profiles available, and with any suggestions about making early warning more useful, please contact Alexandra Crosskey (FEG/PACAPS) at alexandracrosskey@yahoo.co.uk

15. Share these ideas with those in your organisation who can make change happen

No one individual can ensure early response. The problems lie in many places in each organisation, and in many processes and relationships between different organisations. Problems can only be solved by many people working together. A humanitarian programme manager may be able to programme appropriately and to train their own staff, communities and local Government staff. But they may not be able to prepare secondments from elsewhere in the organisation; they may not be responsible for negotiating with donors, or for the logistics of importing necessary goods. They may depend on others to work with finance and administration departments to design systems which meet the demands of donors (and auditors) but still allow for life-saving response to happen on time. This requires organisational buy-in at a high level.

This commitment won't happen on its own. Every individual is responsible for sharing these ideas with their senior management, through whatever avenues exist in their own organisation. You can also share plans with other organisations. Plan a coordinated approach, so everyone knows in advance who would do what in a crisis. You all rely on each other, so you can all help to hold each other accountable for your preparedness. Discuss what each of you is doing to speed up your response times, and share ideas on what else could help make response quicker.

We know that people and livestock move in response to crises (and in response to interventions), so what you do will affect others. Share plans with others operating outside your project area – in the same country and across the border. As well as sharing with central and local Governments, share your plans with UN-OCHA, the international agency with responsibility for coordinating response.

All organisations want to respond on time and to achieve impact. The humanitarian community as a whole has often been late in responding to crises in pastoral areas, but not because of the lack of good-will. We hope that this guide gives a new approach for thinking about how to respond on time, and that it gives a practical tool for achieving earlier response. If you find it useful, please share this guide both within your organisation and outside, because only when many people work together will we be able to achieve truly timely humanitarian response.

2. Describe your scenarios in detail

Now fill in more details about each of your potential hazards – this is describing the 'scenario'. Start with the most likely one (in case you don't have time to do the second).

You have to quantify as many parameters as possible, and as accurately as possible. If you're thinking of an animal epidemic, then try and estimate how many animals might be affected over what period of time. What percentage of these animals is likely to die? How much will calving or kidding rates (and milk production) be affected? How long will the epidemic last? Are there likely to be restrictions imposed on livestock movement? How will this affect prices? And so on. As we mentioned, there is no need to fear that by being too specific in your scenario description, you make it unlikely that this exact scenario can ever happen. You need to be realistic in your scenario, but you don't have to be a prophet. A detailed and realistic scenario which is a bit different from what actually happens will be far more useful in helping you plan than vague description. As you think of the details of the scenario you will realise new areas that you may need to plan for. (For example, thinking about the implications of possible restrictions on livestock movement.)

No hazard will ever have a uniform impact over a large area. Different places will always be affected differently, for many reasons. Think about this, but don't get too worried about it. This is dealt with in step 3.

Try and think what the likely wider impacts of your hazard would be. What has happened in the past should be a good guide, though you do need to be aware of any major changes in the overall context. (If there is no relatively recent example of your hazard, then you may have picked one which is unlikely.) For example, a livestock epidemic might not only affect animal health and production. We have mentioned that it may mean that quarantine restrictions are imposed, with wide-scale effects on market prices. And if borders are closed, will this affect the seasonal migration patterns of those animals which are not directly affected by the disease?

You're bound to miss one or two things which will happen in reality. The important thing is to write down exactly the scenario you are describing so that you can easily compare it with what happens – and then adjust your plans accordingly. (That is what monitoring is for.)

3. Describe the ‘normal’ seasonal calendar

The basis for your planning should be the normal calendar. We know that most people cope in a normal year. (Some form of social support or safety net may be a normal part of coping.) What we need to know at every stage of the development of a crisis is “how different are things now from what they ‘normally’ are at this time of year?” Don’t get too hung up about defining ‘normal’. We just mean ‘the kind of year in which people can cope’ – though not necessarily a wonderful year for them.

There are many ways to get the information you need for this step. If you have been working in the area for a long time, you may simply know it yourself. If not, you can work with local communities to fill it in, if you have time. If the contingency planning is urgent, then it may be better to do it quickly by talking to a few ‘key informants’ (i.e. anyone who you think know the answers to your questions) and then later, when you have time, going to the communities to adapt and improve your calendar. (A contingency plan should ALWAYS be written on paper and NEVER carved in stone, so that it can constantly be updated and improved.)

Always look for research which has already been done which may be able to help you. Livelihood studies have been done in many areas in the Horn of Africa, and these studies may include a seasonal calendar with most of the information you require for this step¹.

What should you put on the calendar? You need to describe anything which is important for people’s livelihoods. (A ‘livelihood’ here just means their economic life – how they find their food, their cash income and what needs they have). What is important in any one area will depend upon people’s livelihood strategies there. In most cases you’ll need to think of the following – but there could certainly be other things which are important.

rainfall

pasture condition

water availability (quantity, location – and maybe cost?)

¹ An example of a useful study is a household economy ‘baseline’ study. These have been completed for Somalia, for parts of NE Kenya, for Somali NRS in Ethiopia and are currently being prepared for Oromiya NRS. See references. Many other kinds of livelihood study should also have useful information.

14. Repeat steps 8-10 with your improved time-lines.

When you succeed in putting better preparedness in place, you can go back and re-plot your shorter start-up time-lines on your hazard calendars. You will hopefully be able to work off a new set of ‘triggers’ which fire much later in the development of the crisis.

It may be useful to use the original trigger set as an ‘alarm’ phase, indicating that you are going to have to reach a decision within a fairly short period of time.

still be acceptable to all; pre-qualify suppliers for tenders; prepare draft contracts for transport, suppliers, service providers, etc.; discuss these contracts with them in advance to ensure acceptance and understanding; pre-position supplies, where possible (e.g. if they can be used elsewhere or sold later); discuss with other agencies how logistics and transport can be shared. Keep all the above regularly up to date.

implementation: conduct regular refresher training for any staff who will be involved in a programme (your own staff, local Government or community based workers); make sure coordination systems at local level are working (e.g. District sectoral forums); use longer term (“development”) programmes to support any possible emergency intervention (e.g. structural support to the livestock marketing sector; support to regular fodder production and marketing, support to local animal health services; etc.)³; coordinate policy decisions with other agencies, Ministries or local Government about how interventions will be carried out – e.g. what should be given freely and what should be paid for, what role should Government civil servants play, etc.

Be as imaginative as you can about what can be prepared before a crisis. Preparedness doesn’t cost much money. If you have correctly identified the most likely crises, it is highly unlikely that the time you invest in preparedness will go to waste.

Although this guide focuses on slow-onset crises, this section is just as relevant for sudden-onset crises. The more you have planned for what would be appropriate in a sudden onset crisis, and the more you can have prepared before a crisis emerges, the faster and better your response will be.

³ ICRC has produced ideas on how to do this as part of a comprehensive ‘tracking strategy’.

migration – who goes where with which animals, and the impact on household livelihood (e.g. milk supply?)
 market conditions (supply and demand? which animals are being sold? prices? Where do the traders come from? etc.)
 peak calving periods and milk availability from different species
 times when livestock are slaughtered
 harvests (for agro-pastoralists). If their harvests are mainly for consumption, then when will the food run out*? If they sell their harvests, when will the money run out**?
 price of basic food items
 other income sources (e.g. firewood/charcoal, skins/hides, casual labour in towns)
 other food sources – wild foods? hunting? fishing?

* *As a rough guide: a household will need around 50-75kg of grain per month, depending on the other foods that are available.*

** *Buying back food is usually at a higher price than you get for selling your harvest.*

Try and quantify as much as you can. If you don’t know all the details, don’t delay your contingency planning in order to go off and spend a month on researching it all. Take educated guesses, make a note of the important gaps in your knowledge, and take steps to fill in the gaps, piece by piece, over time. You can almost certainly do this in the course of your normal work.

4. Draw up your ‘scenario calendar’

Pastoralist economies are quite resilient, but they can also take a long time to absorb and recover from hazards. In a farming area, you can have a drought followed by a perfectly good harvest all within one year. However, for pastoral economies, you’ll probably want to describe your scenario over a 2-3 year period, starting a few months before the hazard strikes and running through until recovery is more or less complete.

Go through the list of parameters that are important that were included in the normal seasonal calendar (step 3) and see if there are any parameters which you wish to add. Look also at the parameters that you used to describe your scenario in step 2. Describe the changes in each parameter over the two or three years – at some periods, you will need to describe the changes month by month and at other periods changes may only be seen over a few months.

Describe what is happening in as precise a way as you can – quantified where relevant. (When is pasture condition ‘poor’, when is it insufficient for a particular species, when does it disappear altogether?) It is worth repeating again here that your description is very unlikely to be an exact prediction of what will happen – but that doesn’t matter. You can’t compare what does happen to a vague description, but if you have a detailed description, then you’ll know just how the real situation is different from your scenario – and, as the crisis develops, you’ll be able to change the predictions accordingly. (For example, if you thought food prices would double by March, but in fact they only rose by 50% in March, then you know that the livelihood situation is less serious than your scenario. By March, you will be changing the prediction which you made about food prices for the succeeding months. This may mean making a decision to delay or cancel a cash or food aid programme planned for July, or to scale it down.) It’s very hard to adjust your plan unless you’ve actually written down the details of the scenario.

No hazard will affect everywhere in a uniform way. Describe the scenario for the most common context in the area where you work, and write down the other ‘variables’ that will be important in determining how the crisis is different in different areas – e.g. the density of livestock, the different security situation in different places, where market access is much better or worse, where there are pockets of more fertile land or perennial springs, etc.

13. Be prepared: shorten start-up time-lines for all interventions

It’s very unlikely that your start-up time-lines are short enough for any activity. Forcing decision making to be much earlier always brings disadvantages.

- i. you are less likely to be sure that the crisis will indeed develop exactly as you have predicted;
- ii. it will be harder to persuade people in your own organisation or in donor organisations to support your programme;
- iii. the longer the time-line, the more delays can arise;
- iv. in a real life situation, your organisation will probably want to be doing other things as well. The more attention that is needed to start-up one programme, the less time and concentration everyone has for thinking about other things that need doing.

If you analyse the start-up time-line you drew up for all your proposed interventions, it is likely that you can find many steps which could either be taken in advance, or at least prepared for in advance. What is actually possible will depend on individual circumstances, but the kinds of thing to think about are:

staffing: identify staffing needs, prepare draft job descriptions, prepare draft contracts, prepare recruitment procedures, identify possible candidates within the organisation for secondment and prepare the secondments, discuss the possibility of secondments with other agencies, prepare the induction. Keep all of this regularly up to date.

financing: find out how different donors view likely crises and appropriate responses, and know what money they might have for proposals such as yours; prepare a draft concept note and share it with potential donors; prepare draft project proposals according to the format of the most likely donors; share these with the donors, and incorporate any feedback; look at the process of bank transfers from donor to field office; try and establish contingency funds which can be spent either with discretion or at least with quick approval procedures. Keep all the above regularly up to date.

administration and logistics: identify the administrative procedures which cause most delays (e.g. duty exemption at customs clearance); discuss them with the agencies involved (Governments, donors, your own administrators, etc.) to agree the most streamlined procedures which would

12. Check that your activities can realistically be on time

You may find that one or more of your chosen intervention is unlikely to ever be on time, because the time delay between decision making and actual benefits appearing on the ground is too long. The example of fodder distribution in figure 1 may fall into this category, if you think you could never persuade anyone to fund it or to support it when only one rains had just failed.

It's best to be honest and admit where an intervention is unlikely to be possible, even if you know that this would be the most appropriate thing to do, and even if you know that it would be possible to get funding for it – but that this would be too late. Implementing 'good projects' too late is not only a waste of money – it takes all our time and energy away from doing other things that could be done on time.

We need to spend our time worrying about what we can do on time. So, there are two choices:

- i. find a different way of achieving the same objective.
- ii. work out how to shorten the time-line.

You should choose the first option first. Find an alternative way of achieving the same objective, which has a better chance of being possible on time, even if it is not as good a choice 'in an ideal world'. Once you have prepared for this alternative programme, you can start work on the second option – seeing how you can shorten the time-line for your preferred alternative. While you are working on this, you will at least know that your organisation is prepared for any eventuality and that no-one is assuming that you will succeed in shortening your start-up time-line until you have actually done so.

It would also be a good idea to have as wide a discussion as possible about all the activities which you decided not to do, because by the time you persuaded people they were necessary it would inevitably be too late. These kinds of discussion may bring about wider change about decision making in the humanitarian world.

5. Analyse the changing livelihood implications

We often tailor our interventions by what is happening in the environment (we truck in water when wells dry up) or by what is happening to livestock (we feed them when they are going to die). Since our concern is to save people's lives and to protect people's livelihoods, we mustn't forget to take a livelihood perspective. (To put it crudely, we are trying to save cattle because people depend on the cattle, and not because we are animal welfare agencies.) It is perfectly normal in the pastoral economy for there to be periods when cattle numbers fall and periods when they are built up. Our interventions should be guided by an understanding of the situations in which pastoralists cannot cope on their own – e.g. when they don't have enough money from other sources to look after their own livestock, and when they would lose too many animals and lose their ability to rebuild their herds in the following years. Herds can be lost through livestock death and also when people have to sell too many animals to buy food because of changes in the terms of trade. In order to know how well people can cope, we really need to understand:

- i. their other sources of food and cash (e.g. the support they get from relatives or remittances; the income they can make from firewood or charcoal sales; etc.)
- ii. how many animals they will need to sell to meet their living needs (food, health care, etc.) – this means looking at prices and quantities!
- iii. how many animals they can afford to sell before their herds become too small and so become unsustainable.

Since none of these answers will be the same for all households in the community, we also need to know a lot about the economic differences between the richer and poorer members of the community – and how many there are in each economic group.

In practice, we are unlikely to have enough information about any of these questions to really know how many need help at any one time. This is unfortunate, because where resources are limited, we really want to be able to prioritise our response where people have the most difficulties in coping. This may or may not be the places where cattle are most at risk of dying.

Don't let what you don't know discourage you from seeing what you do know – about when the humanitarian crisis really starts and when it ends. Prices of livestock and of staple foods are easy to collect – they are almost certainly already being collected by someone. It is not too hard to see how

many animals a family will have to sell each month just to buy staple foods. (If you don't know how to do these calculations, it is fairly easy to find someone who can help.)

It is actually easier to see when the crisis will end without too many calculations, as long as you understand how people live. If you know that people's only source of cash is from livestock sales and their only sources of food are from milk, meat or buying food in the market, then you can see that the crisis will have passed only when milk has returned, and when they have enough new (male) animals which become big enough to sell to buy food. Since breeding is very low in many crises – particularly in droughts – people probably won't have goats to sell for at least a year after the hazard passes (e.g. after the rains return). Cattle have a longer gestation period and a longer growth period before sale, so it will take at least 2-3 years after the rains return before they can sell cattle. If they have large herds and if there is a good market for milk, you can estimate how much money they can earn from milk sales – but even that will take a year to come 'on stream'.

It is obvious that in such a context, a livelihood crisis caused, for example, by a drought will not be over as soon as it rains, as soon as pasture returns or even as soon as animals return to good condition. These considerations should affect how Government and humanitarian agencies respond to such crises.

11. Check that EW is giving you the correct info

In steps 9 and 10, you marked on your scenario calendar the last decision making date for each intervention. You then noted the signs that would indicate you had reached that date (the animal or pasture condition, threshold price levels for food or livestock, etc.) This is your list of indicators and thresholds that will constitute 'triggers' for decision making. Hopefully this list will be quite short –not more than 2-3 indicator-triggers for any one programme type for each scenario that you have planned for.

Now you need to ensure that you will know how closely and how quickly any of these indicators is reaching the trigger-threshold. Existing early warning systems should be giving you this information in a timely way. That is exactly what early warning is for. You need to ensure that:

- i. the early warning systems are providing all the information you require for decision making;
- ii. your organisation is getting the information quickly enough;
- iii. the decision makers in your organisation are seeing the information and giving it the right attention.

If current early warning is not providing the information on one or more of the indicators that you need, then you may be forced to collect this information yourself. Before you rush into doing this, check all the different EW providers and what information they actually collect – information may be collected but not actually disseminated or reported on. If you find that no one is collecting vital information, contact the EW information providers and other agencies. If you need some other information, then possibly so do others. EW providers are there to help you, and they will probably be willing to look at your information requirements, and, where possible, to include this in their future bulletins².

EW bulletins are probably giving you far more than just information about your own chosen indicators. This other information is important for overall analysis about the humanitarian situation. Don't ignore everything else to focus 'blindly' on your chosen indicators. However, you will probably find that decision making becomes simpler when you focus on what you had decided was important, the information about your triggers.

² Please contact PACAPS with any suggestions for making EW more useful for you and your organisation. See 'references'.

It is not realistic to imagine that we can ever mobilise a full emergency response before we have any indication that an emergency will in fact arise. So, for as long as our start-up time-line remains four months, it is almost inevitable that fodder distributions will either not be done or will be implemented late.

If the humanitarian community could find ways to shorten the start-up time-line of this kind of programme to 2 months, then decisions to implement feeding programmes could be made (by Governments, donors, implementing agencies) when it is seen that the second rains are not normal. A decision taken in October could lead to action by December-January. It would be better still to base a decision on meteorological forecasts to allow intervention by November, though this may not be possible. **Halving the start-up time-line and getting the decision date right could transform the effectiveness and applicability of this kind of intervention.**

6. Decide on appropriate livelihood objectives for each stage

What is your role at each stage of the crisis that you described? Before thinking about *activities*, think about *what you should be trying to achieve*. For example, the following objectives may make sense at different stages of a crisis:

- i. helping people to have enough cash and/or food in order to survive
- ii. helping children to have a healthy diet
- iii. helping people to maintain as many assets for the future as possible
- iv. helping people to maintain their core breeding animals for the future
- v. helping people rebuild their herds as fast as possible.

Don't get too distracted by discussions about how you define your objectives. There is no single right way of defining objectives. (For example, you may say you are 'trying to help people diversify their income sources', or you could think of the same thing as 'helping people to maintain enough cash income to buy food, without having to sell assets'. It doesn't matter.) The important thing is to be clear about what you want to achieve. So, for example, there is an important difference between helping to keep animals in a good condition so they fetch a higher price, and helping to keep select female breeding animals alive for future herd regeneration. The differences may lie in when you need to intervene (probably you would intervene earlier to support the price, and later to keep breeding stock alive); the scale on which you need to intervene; how you target; and so on.

Don't have too many triggers – they will either say the same thing, in which case you don't need them all; or they will be contradicting each other, in which they are not helping you! You use several kinds of information to make your situational analysis and to make your plans. However, you want to rely on only two or three 'triggers' to tell you to activate your plans.

the reality...

Ironically, the most difficult kind of crisis to prepare for can be the very slow onset crisis! Droughts are usually only a serious livelihood crisis when more than one rains fail. However, the crisis can hit very hard shortly after the failure of the second rains. This means that a decision to intervene is usually necessary before the second rains have failed – when everyone (pastoralists, agencies, donors) is hoping that the rains are about to come and will avert a crisis. Figure 1 illustrates this, using a fairly generic 'drought timetable' for Northern Kenya, Southern Somalia or Southern Ethiopia. Agencies who have undertaken livestock feeding programmes say that it takes four months from deciding to start-up a project to actual distribution of fodder. In order to distribute feed when livestock need it (when their condition is very poor, during the second failed rains), a decision to start the programme is needed by the end of June, or just after the first failed rains. Since one failed rains will not create a humanitarian crisis, this means we need to decide to respond before we know if there will be a need to respond. This is a serious challenge. In such circumstances, how is it ever possible to run a fodder programme on time? Experience indeed shows that fodder has tended to be distributed in March or April, after the following rains had already begun and livestock had already died.

In part, the challenge points to the need to have long term solutions – e.g. activities working permanently towards developing fodder supply and fodder markets, which can be made appropriate for both 'normal' or good conditions and for crises. (However, that is beyond the scope of this guide!) The challenge also forces us to shorten our start-up time-line.

8. Work out a 'start-up time-line' for each intervention

For each intervention that you propose, write down all the different tasks which your organisation will have to accomplish before it can begin actual implementation. (You will probably need to talk to some colleagues in other departments, e.g. finance, logistics, administration, human resources, to get all the details on the time it may take for recruitment, for ordering vehicles or supplies, bringing in goods through customs, etc.) Whether you are in Government, a UN organisation or in an NGO, you may also need to include time for having your decisions approved by your superiors.

If you don't already have money available within your organisation for your proposed projects, then you need to consider the time it takes to write up a proposal for donors and to get this approved. Think too about the time it takes for money actually to be received from a donor – and possibly for any money transfers to arrive in the place where expenditure will take place.

Some activities can take place at the same time, but others can't start until a previous stage is completed (e.g. you probably can't begin to recruit until your funding is secured). Work out the shortest possible pathway through all the steps: this will give you the minimum time between deciding you want to implement a programme and it actually starting.

There is a tendency to be optimistic in estimating how long each step takes. Remember that your organisation may be dealing with a large scale emergency in the country, involving several programmes being launched in different areas at once. This can delay your own programme. Remember too that staff can be away at meetings, because of sickness or on holiday. It is probably best to give a time range for each step, considering both a 'realistic' estimate and a 'worst case' – based upon previous experience. It is not a good idea to do planning on the basis of 'best case' scenarios.

If you need to train local people from either local Government or communities, you may need to get local acceptance of a policy e.g. around work norms (including allowances) or community contributions. Allow time for such kind of coordination, for agreeing MoUs, etc.

Don't be surprised if your start-up time-line is a few months. For many kinds of project, if it is less than a couple of months, you've probably forgotten many stages, are being over-optimistic – or are just very well prepared!

9. Plot the start-up time-line back onto calendar

Work backwards from the date when your proposed activity should start and count out the weeks or months that your start-up is expected to take. This will give you your ‘decision date’, the latest date by which you will have to take a decision to implement the intervention if it is to start at the appropriate time. For example, suppose (hypothetically) that a de-worming campaign must be completed one month before the rains are due, and it will take one month to cover the project area. If it takes two months to set up the programme, then the last possible date for deciding that this activity should take place is four months before the rains are due – if you delay the decision, then your activity will probably be late. Remember, we are talking about a last date for decision making, and not the date to start thinking about the activity. You need to begin discussions about the proposal early enough to be able to make a decision on time.

Remember of course that your actual decision date will not necessarily be the same calendar month as you have described in your scenario, because a real life crisis may develop more quickly or slowly than your scenario. Good monitoring of the development of any crisis is essential for you to be able to modify your scenario on a regular basis. See the following steps.

10. Look at the triggers you need to use for decision-making

In theory, this step is very simple – though in practice it can be the most difficult.

the theory

You have described a developing crisis, and in step 9 you decided when you need to make your decision for each proposed intervention. You can’t rely on using the calendar months for your decisions, since each actual crisis will evolve at a different rate. You will need to make decisions based upon the ‘stage’ in the crisis you have reached – e.g. ‘pasture being in very poor condition’, ‘the livestock price dropping to 50% of normal, in relation to the grain price’, or ‘men moving to urban centres to look for casual work’. If you have understood the development of this kind of crisis well, then you will know roughly how long it will be from the appearance of this stage of the crisis to the stage when you will have to intervene in a certain way. (For example, you know that it is usually around 3 months from the pasture disappearing to cattle being in serious need of extra feeding which households cannot afford for themselves.)

The triggers for deciding to implement a certain intervention should not indicate that the intervention is actually needed or appropriate at the decision making time. If you wait till the intervention is needed in order to decide you cannot avoid being late – unless you can start full implementation the same day! The ‘triggers’ are the conditions which indicate that in all probability the conditions for needing the intervention will exist by the time you are ready, if you start preparation now. In theory, different organisations could use different triggers for decision making, depending on how prepared they were or how long it would take them to start implementation.

No-one can ever be sure that the conditions will actually arise as forecast, so you need to continuously monitor the situation as you are preparing. Hopefully, you can cancel a proposed intervention if circumstances change in an unexpected way. This requires a good understanding with donors. Building up these kinds of relationships is an essential part of preparedness.

Try not to use triggers which will indicate the last possible date for decisions making. It’s good to build some leeway into your start-up. Realistically, though, the reality of “early response” means you may not be able to convince anyone to act until it’s almost too late.