



# **El Niño: The Silent Emergency**

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Trusting women's leadership in responding to the crisis

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In April 2016, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, alerted governments gathered in Geneva that they collectively faced "*an alarming funding gap of over \$2.2 billion*" to respond to El Niño food crisis.<sup>1</sup> As the same donor officials prepare to attend the high level event on El Niño and La Niña on July 19th in New York, the funding gap has increased to a staggering \$2.5 billion.<sup>2</sup> Despite this apathy from the international community, organisations like ActionAid are working on the frontline, responding to food shortages and other human impacts of this silent crisis. Through local partners, ActionAid is mobilising and supporting communities, women and other actors to face one of the most interminable and complex slow onset natural disasters encountered throughout the organisation's history.

### Key messages:

**The world needs to wake up to a silent emergency:** millions of people are hungry across Africa, Asia and Latin America, as one of the most widespread hunger emergencies in living memory takes hold. A combination of extreme weather, lack of early action and long term investment into resilience building has destroyed crops, killed livestock and dried up water sources around the world. So far the commitments of international governments to support the 60 million people affected has been extremely weak and only one third of the money needed has been raised.

**We must not wait for the worst to happen - action now can still save lives:** widespread suffering, death and disease are not inevitable in 2016 or 2017. The effects of drought on food security and agricultural production are predictable and preventable. Working together, national and international NGO, governments and other aid agencies have the ability to respond and save millions of lives. Efforts must be focused on building climate resilience and the capacity to respond to future shocks. The world's response to the hunger caused by El Niño is a test of how we will cope in the future as climate change brings more erratic weather to many different parts of the globe.

**Women and girls are amongst the worst affected but also hold the key to responding to this crisis:** women play pivotal roles in supporting families and the community. Women do the unpaid care work in households as well as make up 43 per cent of the agricultural workforce and manage up to 90 per cent of staple food crop production such as maize and rice.<sup>3</sup> Women's movements and organisations, women emergency first responders and women farmers must be central in deciding how aid is delivered now and how communities can be prepared for more climate-related emergencies in the future.

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1. *Global Call for Support and Action: Responding to El Niño*. Geneva, OCHA, 26 April 2016.  
2. "19 countries have requested a total of US\$ 3.9 billion for the El Niño response", *El Niño: Overview of Impact, Projected Humanitarian Needs and Response*, OCHA, 2 June 2016  
3. *Gender and Agriculture*, FAO, 2008.



## Ethiopia:

**Wubalech Admasu is the head of a local water association in Janamora district in northern Ethiopia. Despite the arrival of rains and drought beginning to subside in the area, she estimates her town of Merkane Birhan to still have less than half the water required for its population because of El Niño. In charge of the town's water supplies, she has noted a sharp rise in water-borne diseases and many women having to travel long distances, some up to 12 hours a day, to access scarce water supplies.**

PHOTO: GONZALO GUAJARDO/ACTIONAID

The 2015 / 2016 El Niño has resulted in life-threatening weather extremes around the world. More frequent and intense extreme weather events associated with climate change have been made more devastating by one of the strongest El Niño events recorded. It has taken place in a world already dramatically affected by climate change, with a humanitarian system overstretched and not paying any political or media attention to slow onset drought emergencies and food crises. This

has had overwhelming consequences. More than 60 million people<sup>4</sup> of the world's poorest and most vulnerable have been affected by record global temperatures, droughts and floods, seeing their crops fail and their animals die. This number does not include those living in middle income countries, which have not requested international support. In India alone, 330 million people are suffering from severe and widespread droughts. Suicide rates among farmers remain alarmingly high in drought affected parts of the country.<sup>5</sup> Many countries affected have now declared regional or national states of emergency and the UN has stepped up efforts to support early action. But more needs to be done, at all levels, as people reach their limits and the situation worsens. According to the United Nations, the number of people affected by the combined impact of the El Niño and La Niña weather patterns could exceed 100 million by the end of the year.

The El Niño phenomenon is now officially over.<sup>6</sup> But its devastating human impact will linger and increase in the coming weeks and months. El Niño-related food insecurity is projected to peak between December 2016 and April 2017 in communities where coping capacities have been totally eroded after at least two successive failed agricultural harvests. This could become even worse if a La Niña event strikes in the third or fourth quarter of this year. The likelihood of La Niña developing in the final quarter of 2016 has increased to 75 per cent.<sup>7</sup> The specific impacts of La Niña are difficult to predict, but it will likely bring extreme weather to the same regions most affected by El Niño, further disrupting food security and agricultural production and having a cascading effect on livelihoods, health and other sectors.

4. *El Niño 2015 – 2016 Preparedness and Response Situation Report*, WFP, 24 May 2016  
 5. *Heat, fire and drought in India*, UNISDR, 2016  
 6. 'El Niño dissipated and ENSO-neutral conditions returned during over the past month.... these atmospheric and oceanic anomalies reflect a transition from El Niño to ENSO-neutral conditions' Climate Prediction Centre / NCEP / NWS and the International Research Institute for Climate and Society, 6 June 2016  
 7. The Climate Prediction Centre of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts that La Niña is favoured to develop during the Northern Hemisphere summer of 2016, with about a 75% chance of La Niña during the autumn and winter of 2016-17. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) – Climate Prediction Centre, 9 June 2016

## The El Niño crisis is further entrenching inequality

The drought, crop failure, food insecurity and shortages of water brought on by El Niño potently reveal the power imbalances and inequalities that prevail in most of the affected societies. When disasters strike, it is those with less power and fewer resources who invariably suffer the most. And disasters also deepen inequality. Those most affected by drought or floods must sell their land or livestock at low prices, effectively transferring assets from the poor to the wealthy.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of societal imbalances, gender roles and inequality, women and girls are disproportionately affected by El Niño at two levels. Firstly, women do most of the household labour, collecting water and firewood, cooking, cleaning and washing. They are also responsible for family care and often care for others in the community. This double burden for women and girls has increased during the drought. In Lesotho, over 60 per cent of affected community members interviewed by ActionAid for a needs assessment said women and girls now must walk further and then wait longer every day for two to three additional hours to find scarce water for the family, missing out on education and income opportunities.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, women make up the majority of smallholder farmers in most developing countries. Smallholder farmers produce as much as 90 per cent of the food grown in Africa and 50 per cent of the world's food.<sup>10</sup> In a context of El Niño induced droughts - where agriculture is the single most affected sector, absorbing around 84 per cent of all economic impact<sup>11</sup> - women are severely affected in their livelihoods and are forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms. Across the El Niño affected countries, women are giving

up meals in order to make food stretch further for other family members. In Lesotho, more than half of the male and female groups interviewed reported women turning to prostitution to make ends meet, and an increase in marriage rates for young girls - presumably because parents are desperate for the resources provided by dowries - have been reported in at least four districts.<sup>12</sup>



### Viet Nam:

**Nguyen Van Vinh lives in Cai Keo village, Dong Hai district in Viet Nam's Mekong Delta. His community is dependent upon shrimp fishing as its main source of income. Due to the impact of El Niño the water table has dropped by several metres leading to less water for and less effective freshwater shrimp production in ditches. Nguyen would usually earn US\$ 360 per month during the shrimp harvesting season (November to April). However this year, as a result of low water levels, his own income has dropped to practically nothing, reflective of the US\$ 1 million drop in income for Dong Hai district as a whole this year.**

PHOTO: ACTIONAID

8. *El Niño: The case for urgent action*, Oxfam, 2015.
9. "ActionAid Lesotho works in 6 districts of Lesotho; it covers 7 community councils". *Rapid Assessment report on the effects of El Nino in Lesotho (unpublished)*, ActionAid Lesotho, 12 February 2016
10. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimate that at least 80% of rural smallholder farmers worldwide are women. *What Women Farmers Need: A blueprint for Action*, ActionAid, 2011
11. *2015–2016 El Niño: Early action and response for agriculture, food security and nutrition* - Update # 9, FAO, 2016
12. Illegal activities such as prostitution was reported as the most common coping livelihoods strategy by 66.7 per cent of the Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) *Rapid Assessment report on the effects of El Nino in Lesotho (unpublished)*, ActionAid Lesotho, 12 February 2016

This intimate double “front-line” knowledge and engagement in the drought response suggests enormous potential for women to be leading agents in disaster-planning and preparedness in communities, and to play a significant role in responding to emergencies and bolstering resilience.<sup>13</sup> Regrettably, women are currently not at the centre of the response or long term measures and decisions that are taken. For example, women suffer inequitable access to agricultural services and information. In 97 countries assessed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), female farmers only received five per cent of all agricultural extension and advice services. Worldwide, only 15 per cent of those providing these services are women.<sup>14</sup>



### **Somaliland:**

**18 year old Fahima from Somaliland has seen her and her family’s diet change because of the El Niño induced drought in the country. Her family used to grow wheat, maize, onions and tomatoes and make use of traditional ground storage techniques to preserve foods for lean periods. Now that there has been successive dry seasons, without any rain, their food stocks are almost entirely depleted and the family’s diet greatly restricted. “The stored food is nearly empty,” said Fahima. “We used to drink milk and eat fruits like watermelons. Those foods have disappeared now.”**

PHOTO: JENNIFER HUXTA/ACTIONAID

### **Women’s leadership holds the key to solving the crisis**

Drought responses in East Africa in 2010/11 and West Africa in 2011/12 have yielded important lessons, among them the critical importance of ensuring communities and their most marginalized members, (re-)gain genuine and timely ownership and management of communal assets such as water bodies and rangelands.

Women are amongst the most marginalised in their communities but are often the key actors in preparing and confronting emergencies like drought. Promoting and ensuring that women are active participants in decision making processes is not only part of international commitments taken by governments worldwide for the full realisation of gender equality and the empowerment of women included in Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development but is also what women at the frontline of emergencies are requesting.<sup>15</sup> There is also evidence that improved gender equality programming contributes to making humanitarian response outcomes more effective and inclusive.<sup>16</sup> The most effective responses are those that recognise the leadership of women and give them the resources needed to address the sociocultural and economic barriers within their communities. Women leaders are recognised as being able to reach all parts of a community; identify and prioritise community needs in sequence; allocate resources (including available land and water) fairly and expeditiously; participate in establishing responsive and inclusive governance processes; and scale up facilitation of vital services like education and health-care for all. Finally, women’s leadership in crises can fundamentally and permanently shift power in an environment of unequal gender dynamics that carry over into post emergency and new emergency periods. As world leaders prepare to meet in New York on July 19th to respond to the impact of El Niño / La Niña and to get ready for future extreme weather crises, they must put women’s needs and capacities at the centre, listen to their voices and trust their involvement and leadership.

13. *The South Asia Women’s Resilience Index: Examining the Role of Women in Preparing for and Recovering from Disasters*, ActionAid and The Economist, 2014  
 14. *Fact Sheet on Extension Services, Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS)*, July 2012  
 15. *On The Frontline: Catalysing Women’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action*, ActionAid, 2016.  
 16. *The Effects of Gender Equality Programming on Humanitarian Outcomes*, UN Women, 2015.



## Zimbabwe:

Ellen Matereke is a mother of six living in Makoni district in northeastern Zimbabwe. Before the drought, Ellen, like many other mothers in the area, were able to meet the school fees of their children and other costs with profits from small-scale farming. With the drought, this income has been completely wiped out and Ellen is having to rely on emergency assistance to feed and school her children. ActionAid has provided Ellen with cash transfers sent via mobile money. The cash transfer allows Ellen to take charge of using the money in the best way for her own family.

PHOTO: CTIONAID

## Recommendations

Firstly, **national governments must continue to lead, at the highest political level, existing plans to alleviate the impact of El Niño and launch “no regrets” La Niña preparedness and early action plans.** National governments have the primary responsibility to meet the food security needs of their citizens.

- National official bodies must coordinate, with the support of regional and international organisations, these preparedness and early responses ensuring that local organisations and NGOs, and in particular local women’s farmers and small holder organisations, are involved in the planning and implementation. Particular strategies to protect women from the impacts of disaster must include their active participation in decision-making on the use of aid and ensuring women’s leadership in identifying needs and solutions.
- National governments must prioritise investments and specific budget allocations for smallholder farmers to necessarily become more resilient, productive and profitable. In Africa, for example, governments have pledged to allocate 10 percent of national budgets to the agriculture sector. These strategies must support women and build their resilience.
- International donors must prioritise the El Niño response and anticipate a La Niña food crisis. Humanitarian and development funds need to urgently be mobilised to support governments for an early response to the growing food insecurity forecasted for the end of the year.

Secondly, this significant global food crisis has confirmed that slow onset drought disasters do not command political or media attention until the worst scenario occurs. In 2011, early signs of an oncoming food crisis were clear many months before the emergency reached its peak in the Horn of Africa. Yet it was not until the situation had reached crisis point that the international system started to respond at scale and media covered the famine and deaths in Somalia.<sup>17</sup> Donors, governments and public opinion are not responsive to these crises until lives and livelihoods are lost. National governments and donors are reluctant to respond and commit funds early and in good time, despite increasingly reliable forecasting information

17. *A Dangerous Delay: The cost of late response to early warnings in the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa*, Oxfam and Save the Children, 2012.

and the cost savings associated with early response. This attitude, in a world with a “new normal” of record global temperatures, drought and erratic rains, is deepening economic inequality, threatening development gains and the objective to eradicate hunger by 2030. At a time when governments are meeting in New York to keep track of progress of the SDGs which had promised, less than a year ago, that “no one is left behind”, such a situation is causing immense and unnecessary suffering to millions across the world.

International donors, UN agencies, national governments, civil society and the private sector should **meet in a La Niña conference to develop priorities for this impending crisis in September 2016. The meeting could serve to start building a new compact among UN Member States to reduce the impacts on vulnerable people of slow onset forecast weather events, such as El Niño and La Niña.** Civil society organisations and women's organisations must play a central role in this conference and in setting this new plan for tackling forecast weather events. The plan should have as guiding principles:

- Women's needs and capacities at the centre of this plan and women and women's organisations involved as recipients as well as decision-makers.
- A focus on resources in the bottom quintile. The 20 per cent of the population with the lowest income has reduced access to resources, credit, assets and state support to withstand climate related shock, and is most likely to be pushed into poverty.
- Early warning systems and forecasting leading automatically to early response through a system of incentives between development partners and national governments and mutual accountability, where affected communities must have a voice.
- A contribution to scaling up universal social protection programmes and to transitioning to climate-resilient agriculture.



### **Ethiopia:**

**Embet Mekonnen is the head of her community's savings and loan scheme in the village of Afagehega in northern Ethiopia. Over the years, climate change and soil degradation have forced the community to shift from growing wheat, sorghum and beans in their fields to only being able to grow teff (a drought-tolerant cereal indigenous to Ethiopia). This year El Niño has exacerbated the situation with the usual twice yearly rainy season only coming once and with reduced rainfall.**

**However, Embet and her community recognise that they have been fortunate to get a harvest this year when many others have not, and that this is due to their resilience work to conserve soil and manage their watershed. The vegetables they grow and livestock they can buy through their no-interest savings and loan scheme has been critical to helping their survival through this lean period.**

PHOTO: TERESA ANDERSON/ACTIONAID

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**ActionAid** is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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