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# Should I stay or should I go?

## Communicating Actionable Flood Early Warning Information in Kenya



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***Having a sound flood forecasting system in place is not enough. Only understandable and actionable early warnings enable communities to take action to mitigate potential impacts of a hazard.***

As part of Welthungerhilfe Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Facility (WAHAFA), a multiyear program financed by the German Federal Foreign Office, WHH Kenya, its local partner PACIDA and other stakeholders carried out a flood simulation exercise to test stress their readiness and effectiveness of their Anticipatory Action Plan (AAP) for a future crisis situation. Part of the exercise was to develop early warning messages for at-risk communities and crafting a communication plan that outlines how and when to disseminate information and who need to be involved to ensure that everyone is informed and is able to

act timely on flood-related information.

These early warning messages and communication plans were later presented to various groups of the community. Focus group discussions were held to gather feedback on how to improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of these messages. In the future, these messages will help communicate flood risk and behavioral advices to at-risk communities.

To decide how to communicate with an at-risk community, participants looked at how different communities and subgroups within those communities typically receive and send information. This is known as *community profiling*.

Community profiling should be done as part of the AAP development. The profile helps Anticipatory Action implementers to identify the lifestyle, interests, levels of education, the media consumption habits of people and how they wish

to engage. A community profile can guide the development of an Early Warning System (EWS) and a respective engagement strategy.

***At 78, Lokidokin (center) still herds his cattle. The pastoralist has regularly experienced the force of nature - floods have swept away his cattle, drought claimed the few that survived. Without scientific early warnings, he has relied on traditional forecasters, however, he hopes for early warnings via radio, believing the sooner he knows, the better he can act.***





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### Identifying the segment of the community and developing tailored early warning messages

During the simulation exercise participants developed early warning messages tailored to a specific segment (e.g., women or persons with disabilities) of the community. When communicating with at-risk populations it is important to consider society’s diversity. Only inclusive Risk Communication can ensure that everyone can receive and act on hazard-related information and that the information is tailored to actual needs and takes into account other characteristics such as gender, age, vulnerabilities, economic situation, religion and cultural identity, status in the community, educational background, language and literacy. Based on this, participants drafted early warning messages and communication plans detailing target audiences, message content (warning & action), language(s), type of communication (verbal, written, visual), dissemination time(s) (e.g. morning, after prayer time), channel(s) (e.g. radio, WhatsApp, house to house, etc.), channel owner (to be involved, contacted/ e.g. community leader, Imam, radio station) and the person responsible.

### Testing early warning messages and integrating the voices of the community

Together with some of the stakeholders who participated in the simulation exercise, PACIDA and WHH Kenya visited communities who have been previously involved in the development of AAPs. During the visit, the results of the simulation and the draft early warning messages were presented to the community members. In smaller groups, community members discussed and dissected the early warning messages, refined their wordings to make them more understandable and provided

feedback on proposed communication channels and dissemination schedules. Especially mass communication channels with a wide reach like radio and bulk SMS were identified as the most trusted and inclusive source of information. Stakeholders’ assumptions that men would like to receive flood warnings over local radio stations in respective local languages like Turkana and Borana, especially in the evening, was confirmed in the community discussions. Men reported that the whole family comes together in the evening to listen to the radio as men are back from herding the cattle and women have returned from their household responsibilities like going to the market of fetching water and collecting firewood. Early warning messages received in the evening also allow men to discuss matters in their traditional parliament which is held at night after around 9 pm. This forum allows to spread the message further to other households and enables all community members to take immediate action.

***“Often community members ignore early warnings and this “ignorance is killing the community”. This exercise helped to demonstrate the importance of acting on early warning information but also that co-developed messages are more likely to be understood and acted upon.”***

Joseph from Samburu Isiolo County  
page 3, top photo





*“During previous floods, my husband was in charge of evacuating the livestock, while I took care of the household. This meant getting the children and the rest of the family to safety and saving our belongings, especially important documents like birth certificates. I believe that co-developed early warning messages would help us take even more effective action if floods are announced.”*

Bernadetta, from Samburu Isiolo County

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The community agreed that tailored warnings for men and women would help make messages more actionable and relevant. Community members have very specific social responsibilities. In the event of a flood warning, men will rush to evacuate the livestock while relying on women to take care of children and belongings. Therefore, early warning messages targeted at men should focus more on livestock and potential safer grounds to evacuate livestock to. Women, however, need information on where to evacuate children, the elderly and other family members, as well as the salvaging of important documents such as birth certificates. By including timelines, community members also felt that warnings become more actionable and more likely to be taken seriously. Concrete language and specific instructions on what to do and where to go would also help to improve warning-induced action.

Further, the communities flagged that early warning messages needs to be conflict-sensitive, meaning that it should take into account that telling people to evacuate to safer ground may mean moving to neighboring communities that may not welcome them. Fighting over scarce resources such as grazing land due to the influx of livestock from other communities has led to conflicts in the past. Holding government-led peace meetings and having agreements in place to prepare host communities for potential influx of people and livestock could help mitigate hostilities.

The communities also welcomed the idea to incorporating traditional knowledge systems into early warning messages and streamlining traditional forecasts with scientific forecasts. They did, however, also note challenges in conducting traditional forecasting methods. In

particular, after past disasters decimated the communities' livestock count, it has been challenging to get community members to donate a goat to read its intestines for weather and climate forecasts, as people's goat population had already been significantly reduced.

***“If traditional leaders receive early warnings through the radio during evening hours, they can convene a traditional parliament meeting at night and spread the warning for timely action across all villages at risk”***

Gabriel from Samburu Isiolo County  
page 3, bottom photo

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