

# GETTING AHEAD OF DISASTERS AND PROTECTING PEOPLE AT SCALE

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Progress, challenges and opportunities in  
linking social protection and early action



Risk-informed  
Early Action  
Partnership



Save the  
Children

## About REAP

Launched at the UN Climate Action Summit (UNCAS) in September 2019, the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) brings together stakeholders across the climate, humanitarian and development communities to get ahead of disasters. The partnership consists of more than 100 organisations, spanning from national governments, universities, research institutes, civil society, networks, platforms and UN agencies. The partners operate at global, regional and national scales.

<https://www.early-action-reap.org/>

## The Working Group

This document has been developed by the International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED), Save the Children and the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) on behalf of the REAP Working Group on Linking Early Action and Social Protection.

**Note to the Reader:** *This paper was conceived by REAP's Social Protection Working Group in 2023 and the ideas presented below were drawn from views expressed and research work done throughout 2024. The paper was ready for publication in early 2025, but this coincided with widespread announcements of budget cuts from multiple leading humanitarian aid and social protection donors, including the US, UK, Germany, Norway and Sweden.*

*Several months later, the full implications for future work on social protection and early action are still not clear. Whilst there are limited data and vague announcements in relation to some donors, and several cuts have not yet taken full effect, it is reasonable to expect significant declines in Official Development Assistance (ODA) from 2025 onwards. The OECD (2025) projects a 9 to 17% drop in 2025, following a 9% drop in 2024. The outlook beyond 2025 is very uncertain (Humanitarian Action, 2025). This has led to general organizational upheaval across the aid system, closure of some programmes and organisations, widespread lay-offs and a focus on re-prioritisation (Institute of Development Studies, 2025).*

*What we do know for certain is that over 90% of people (ILO, 2024) in the world's poorest countries continue to have no form of social protection whatsoever, leaving them unprotected (OCHA, 2025). In a scenario where we see reduced finance flowing from development and humanitarian partners, it is therefore still important to focus on social protection and even more critical to think ahead of disasters to set up effective financing plans and invest in early action. Our recommendations therefore do not change, but take on a growing urgency. Of course, aid is only part of the solution for social protection and early action and governments should drive both agendas. However, with countries facing limited fiscal space to adequately fund their own social protection (de Schutter, 2025), growing debt burdens and repeated impacts of climate change, the international community still has an important role to play.*

**Cover photo:** Bangladesh Coast • © USGS on Unsplash

## Purpose of the paper

This policy guidance paper aims to highlight the critical need for stronger links between early action and social protection systems to safeguard vulnerable populations from the impacts of climate-related disasters. By synthesizing current progress, challenges, and opportunities, the paper provides actionable recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of these interconnected systems, ensuring that early interventions can better protect lives and livelihoods in the face of escalating climate risks.

The focus of the paper is identifying key areas where early action and social protection can be more effectively integrated, exploring existing barriers that hinder such integration, and presenting strategies for overcoming these challenges. The paper also outlines the potential benefits of this link, emphasizing how it can improve disaster preparedness, response, and resilience, particularly for those most at risk. This paper focuses on government-led social protection in acknowledgement of the role of government in protecting and providing services to citizens. However, many international actors contribute in different ways to social protection systems and programmes, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected contexts.

The primary audience for this paper includes government decision-makers, funders, and thematic experts working in the fields of early action and social protection. These stakeholders are instrumental in shaping policies, funding mechanisms, and technical approaches that can drive the integration of these two systems to deliver more comprehensive and timely support to communities facing climate-related threats.

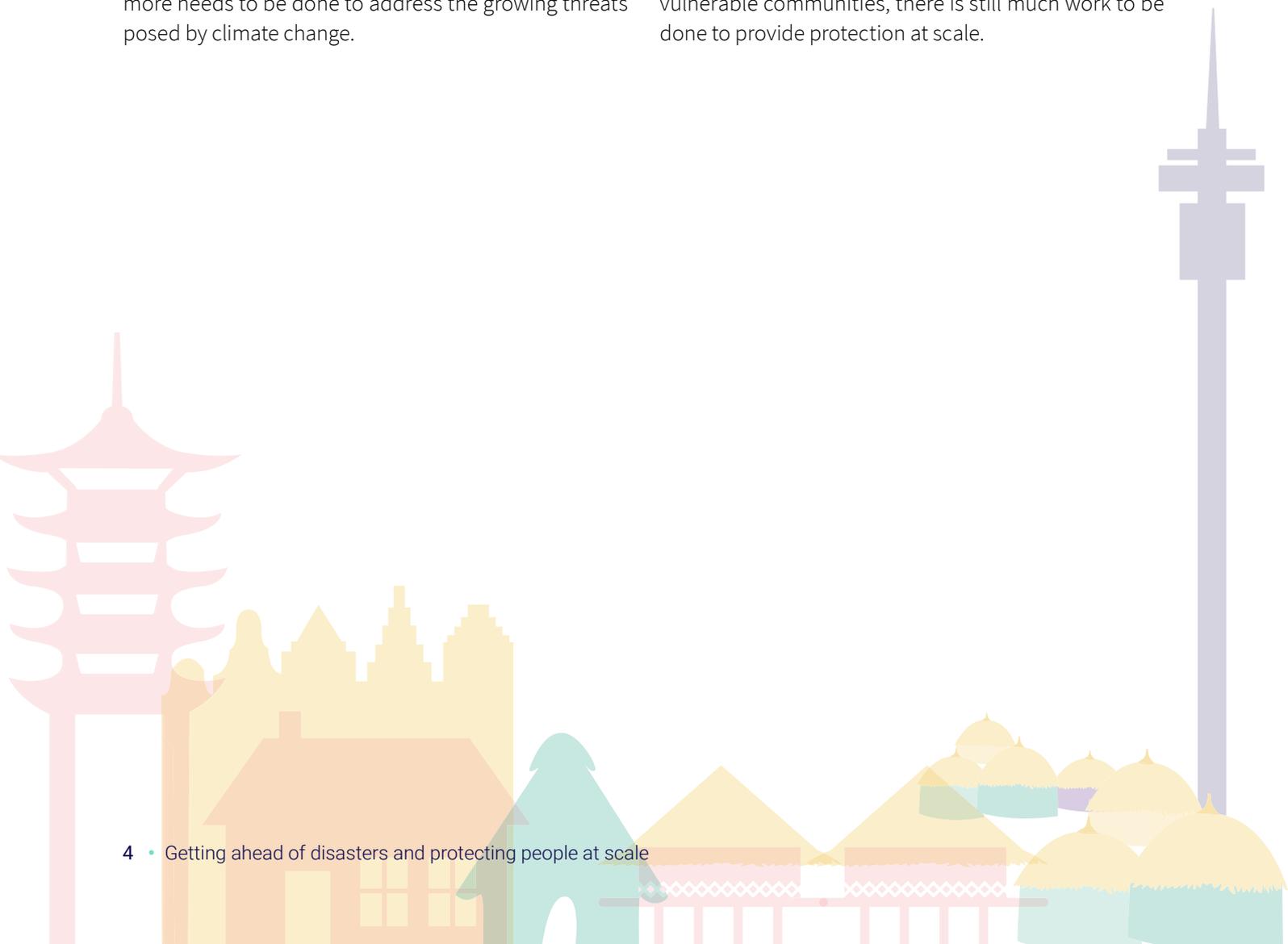
# The rationale for linking social protection and early action

Climate change is exerting unprecedented pressure on global populations, with rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and increasing sea levels contributing to more frequent and severe heatwaves, floods, droughts, and wildfires. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023), 3.6 billion people currently live in areas highly susceptible to climate change impacts, including 1 billion children (UNICEF, 2021). Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause an additional 250,000 deaths annually from undernutrition, malaria, diarrhoea, and heat stress alone (WHO, 2023).

Despite the growing risks, there remains a significant gap in funding – and planning – for preventive measures. Research indicates that every US\$1 invested in risk reduction and prevention can save up to US\$15 in post-disaster recovery. Nevertheless, for every US\$100 of disaster-related official development assistance (ODA), only 50 cents are directed towards protecting development from the impact of disasters (UNDRR, 2021). While these figures underscore the importance of investment in resilience and prevention, the reality is that much more needs to be done to address the growing threats posed by climate change.

Traditionally, social protection systems have focused on providing regular support to alleviate poverty, address underlying vulnerabilities and build resilience. Many countries and organisations are exploring the possibility of adapting social protection systems and programmes to support DRM and wider resilience objectives. Some organisations have experimented with using social protection to provide timely support to at-risk communities, whether before, during or after a disaster.

However, the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) 2024–2026 World Social Protection Report (ILO, 2024) finds that in the 20 countries most vulnerable to the climate crisis, a mere 8.7% of the population is covered by some form of social protection, leaving 364 million people wholly unprotected. Just 25% of the population in the 50 most climate-vulnerable countries are effectively covered, meaning an incredible 2.1 billion people most at risk from climate crises have no social protection cover at all. Therefore, whilst social protection programmes have the potential to be effective mechanisms for delivering adaptive, anticipatory, and preventive interventions to vulnerable communities, there is still much work to be done to provide protection at scale.



## The practicalities of integrating social protection and early action

The integration of social protection with early action and early warning systems offers a proactive approach to risk management incorporating shock-responsive and adaptive approaches. By linking early action with social protection, support can reach at-risk communities before a shock materialises, whether it be rapid- or slow-onset, or soon after impacts are experienced. This pre-emptive approach can reduce humanitarian needs, mitigate the negative impact on livelihoods, and allows for more efficient resource allocation.

By capitalising on advances in forecasting, risk analysis, preparedness/contingency planning and financing mechanisms, governments, communities and the actors that support them can take increasingly risk-informed approaches to hazards and realise the full potential of social protection systems to protect people in the face of the climate crisis.

This involves ensuring that social protection systems, their programs, and delivery chains can be effectively leveraged to support disaster risk management (DRM) activities, including anticipatory action (AA), where feasible and appropriate. For instance, social registries can be utilized to identify recipients for DRM interventions, while the payment mechanisms of national social protection programs can deliver early or anticipatory cash assistance. Social protection programmes can provide beneficiaries with pre-emptive or timely cash transfers, agricultural and livestock subsidies, food assistance, and community-based interventions, such as water resource management, before or after a shock.

Social protection systems and programmes can also link with early warning and risk information in other ways too, for example, the communication and outreach channels of large-scale national social protection programmes can be used to disseminate early warnings or evacuation messages via SMS or local authority representatives in the event of approaching floods or typhoons. By better using risk information, steps can

also be taken to protect the social protection systems and programmes themselves, so that when a shock happens, programmes are able to continue operating.

Social protection can extend beyond anticipatory or shock-response measures to also build adaptive capacities based on short-term, seasonal, and long-term climate predictions. Understanding a community's current food and income gaps, and the cost of necessary adaptation actions, is essential to help households cope better during shocks. Cash transfer programs that address these gaps can build adaptive capacities, enabling vulnerable communities to thrive despite the challenges posed by climate change, and preventing them from slipping further into poverty with each disaster.

Realising the potential and emerging promise of integrated early action and social protection requires collaborative efforts between social sector experts, disaster risk management agencies, hydrometeorological organisations, humanitarian actors and beneficiary groups. Coherent policies, joint planning, shared data platforms, and coordinated activation mechanisms are essential to create a seamless system that leverages the strengths of each sector. Ensuring collaboration among stakeholders, national and local governments, NGOs, and communities is crucial during both the design and implementation phases of such programs.

In 2021, the REAP Working Group on 'Linking Social Protection and Early Action' highlighted the potentially transformative impact of integrating these systems to deliver adaptation benefits for climate-vulnerable communities. Scaling social protection for climate resilience involves both reaching more vulnerable communities and linking different departments across governments. Aligning social protection with national climate adaptation plans, investing in resilient infrastructure, creating responsive delivery channels, and engaging with at-risk communities are likely to catalyse transformative change.

## Progress with integrating social protection and early action

There are several positive signals and emerging examples from across the world where policies and practices are linking up social protection with early action.

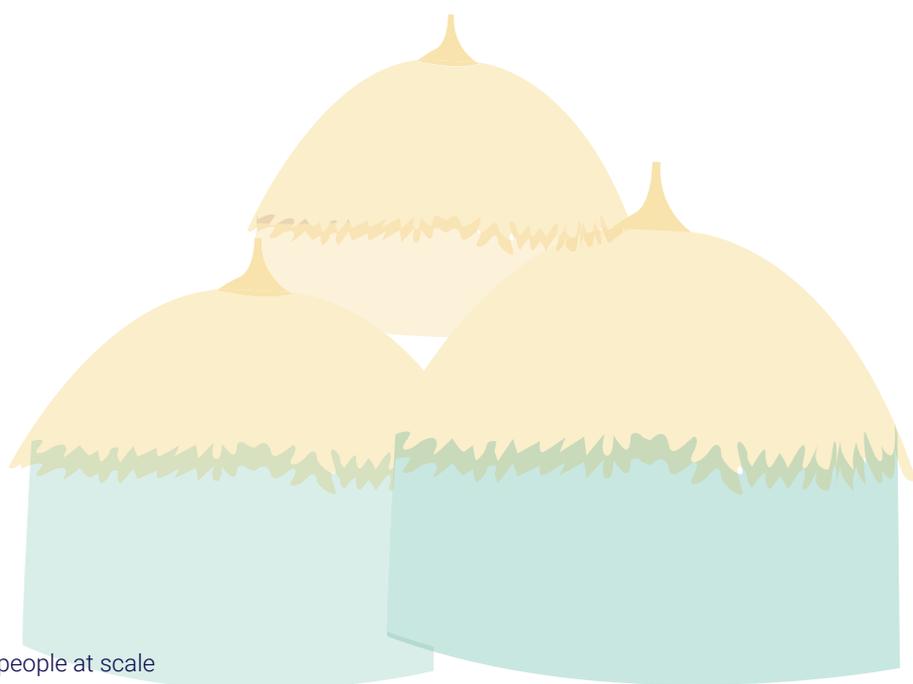
In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, many governments used their social protection systems and programmes to distribute support to affected people, either using their own funds, or resources from international agencies. However, in most countries, this use of social protection to provide emergency support had not been planned in advance, with supporting policies, processes and finance. We can learn from these experiences to make the necessary arrangements in advance to ensure early, effective and efficient use of social protection when a disaster is expected or occurs.

This type of planning and pre-arranging systems is now underway in several countries and beginning to bear fruit. For example, when Pakistan delivered cash top-ups to more than 2 million households two weeks after floods in 2022, it was only possible because those households were already registered as social protection recipients in the National Socio-Economic Registry and with an established means of payment ([BISP, 2022](#)). When the government of Malawi, with support from the World Bank, delivered cash transfer 'top-ups' to 74,000 recipients of the government's Social Cash Transfer Programme in anticipation of a forecasted drought period, it was only possible because the SP system and its delivery chain was functioning and had already registered those 74,000 people in their social registry, provided them with mobile money accounts, and collected their SMS numbers so they could share early warnings ([IIED, 2023](#) and [WHO, 2023](#)).

There has been considerable emphasis on using disaster risk financing to support the use of social protection to build climate resilience. Pre-arranged financial instruments, such as contingency funds and parametric insurance can be set up in advance and linked to social protection programmes. By incorporating pre-agreed triggers, they can quickly release funds to be channelled through social protection systems and programmes.

Climate funds are also demonstrating interest in funding adaptive social protection. For example, Save the Children recently secured Green Climate Fund (GCF) approval to deliver a climate-resilient social protection initiative in Mozambique called LINK, Building Climate Resilience by Linking Climate Adaptation and Social Protection through Decentralised Planning in Mozambique. This is one of the first projects on adaptive social protection supported by the GCF and could pave the way for more financing toward similar initiatives.

Another area of emphasis has been ensuring community engagement, which is key to ensuring that interventions are culturally relevant and aligned with local needs. Building capacities at all levels, from policymakers to community workers, fosters the necessary supportive ecosystem for scaling. Multi-stakeholder collaboration, including with the private sector and NGOs, has the potential to unlock additional resources and innovation. The use of technology, such as mobile banking for cash transfers, can also enhance the efficiency and reach of social protection programs.



## SUCCESSFUL TOOLS AND CASE STUDIES

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**Climate Resilience Information System and Planning (CRISP-M) Tool** for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is a web and mobile phone-based tool. It uses ten Geographic Information System (GIS) layers to map, manage and analyse data to support planning, implementation and monitoring of MGNREGS. It was co-developed by IIED with Madhya Pradesh Council of Science & Technology (MPCST) for the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India, under the Infrastructure for Climate Resilient Growth (ICRG) programme funded by the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.

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**Household Economy Analysis (HEA)** is a unique livelihoods-based framework that assesses how households access the food and income they need throughout the year and how they will be affected by external events like a drought or food price increase. HEA can be used to identify early actions to prepare for and respond to predicted food and income gaps. HEA differs from other approaches because it projects and quantifies households' access to food and income. It can also be used at scale, and for a wide range of shocks and scenarios: if a shock can be forecasted, HEA can model its projected impact. Save the Children and our partners have implemented HEA in 50 countries since 2012.

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**The Cost of the Diet (CotD) tool** is a software and method to calculate the cost and affordability of a nutritious diet and model interventions (cash transfers, livelihood or nutritional support, behaviour change) to reduce the affordability gap of a diet that meets all nutritional requirements, which would prevent malnutrition.

## Overcoming challenges

While the integration of social protection and early action offers significant opportunities, several challenges must be addressed for effective implementation. Some of the core challenges are included below, with mitigating actions.

### A

#### COVERAGE

As noted above, in many countries, the coverage of social protection programmes is very low, leaving many at-risk people unable to benefit from measures implemented in this way. The risk of exclusion is high, particularly in remote, fragile or conflict-affected areas and particularly for highly-vulnerable groups such as children, refugees, displaced people and isolated rural communities.

Actors seeking to use social protection as a means of providing early action therefore need to support efforts to expand social protection coverage and improve system functionality, in order to create a strong foundation. These types of initiative may be implemented by development actors over the longer term, but early action actors should make sure their work contributes towards stronger underlying programmes and systems for routine social protection.

### B

#### COORDINATION

Achieving alignment and collaboration across sectors and agencies, both within governments and with external stakeholders, is complex but essential. Effective coordination is necessary to ensure that social protection systems can be rapidly activated in response to early warnings. However, this is very challenging, given the number of different parts of government involved, each with their own institutional perspectives, planning and budgeting cycles and processes. In particular, clear lines of communication and coordination are needed between the relevant government ministries and other organisations, for example those working on Disaster Risk Management (DRM), social protection, forecasting and risk analysis (including early warning), finance, and planning.

Lines of communication and coordination can be defined and applied at the political level, through relevant policy, legal and regulatory environment instruments. They can also be defined at the operational level through delivery guidelines and/or standard operating procedures that are used by local officials running programmes across the delivery chain (e.g. payment mechanisms; communication and outreach; recipient identification, registration and targeting; etc).

## C

### FUNDING

Securing sustained funding for all types of preparedness activities, proactive measures, and rapid response remains a challenge, and using social protection for early action is no exception. Governments and donors often struggle to set aside a budget for shocks that may not happen, or for pre-emptive measures due to uncertainty around the reliability of forecasts or the cost-effectiveness of anticipatory action compared to traditional humanitarian responses. There may also be differing expectations around whether social protection, DRM, humanitarian or development budgets should be providing funding for anticipatory or shock-responsive social protection.

Even when funding can be found, there may be challenges around the timeliness of financial flows, in particular when it comes to AA. Bureaucratic and administrative requirements (for example, anti-corruption laws, rules and regulations) may mean it is simply impossible for authorities to release funding to provide assistance in anticipation of a shock, without certain requirements being met (i.e., post disaster damage reports, declarations of a disaster situation). In addition, AA for rapid-onset shocks often requires the release of funding from budgets within 24–48 hours, which also may not be possible.

Using pre-arranged financing instruments can help with the timeliness of financial flows, as the details, triggers and processes are all agreed in advance. However, overall amounts of pre-arranged finance from donors remains small and governments have so far been hesitant to commit their own resources on a large scale to fund anticipatory or shock-responsive social protection. More international sources of pre-arranged finance may become available for social protection, for example from climate finance or new initiatives such as the Global Shield Against Climate Risks or the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage.

## D

### INSTITUTIONALISATION

Most of the examples of adaptive, anticipatory or shock-responsive social protection have been initiated and funded by international actors working in collaboration with governments, for example the World Bank, bilateral donors, UN agencies, the Red Cross Red Crescent movement and INGOs. It remains a relatively new and emerging approach, requiring more government ownership and to move from individual pilots funded by international actors to being embedded in government planning and budgeting processes, in order to reach scale.

# Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Social protection is increasingly expected to help manage the impacts of widespread shocks, by making systems and programmes more adaptive and shock-responsive. However, integrating these functions is complex and must be done carefully to avoid weakening the core goals and operations of existing programmes and systems.

Based on the analysis and insights from the working group, the following recommendations aim to strengthen the integration of social protection and early action, to enhance climate resilience for the most at-risk communities.

## Advocate for a risk-informed and proactive approach within social protection actors

Promote greater use of forecasts, triggers, and pre-emptive planning within social protection activities more generally – programmes can act not just as delivery channels for early action, but as beneficiaries of early warning information themselves. Social protection authorities can improve business continuity during crises by integrating anticipatory protocols into programmes, ensuring critical services like cash transfers and public works continue to function.

## Enhance collaboration and coordination within government and with external organisations

Strengthen collaboration across social protection, DRM, climate, and humanitarian sectors. Develop shared policies, data platforms, and joint response mechanisms. Strong coordination with national and local authorities, as well as communities, is essential for integrating early warning and early action into social protection systems.

## Consider how social protection can contribute to all aspects of climate resilience

Social protection has a role across the full climate resilience spectrum – from prevention and preparedness to recovery and transformation. Review existing support packages to assess their adequacy and identify opportunities for adjustments that can contribute to climate resilience. Promote alignment with national climate goals and strengthen integration into NDCs, NAPs, and other strategic frameworks.

### **Make use of technological advances and innovation**

Leverage digital tools like mobile payments, predictive analytics, and scalable communication channels to enhance delivery, targeting, and responsiveness. Strengthen data infrastructure, address quality and accessibility challenges, and align innovations with broader policy goals.

### **Build local capacity and community engagement**

Ensure that early warning and anticipatory interventions are context-specific and community-driven. Build capacity at the local level – from policy design to frontline implementation – to improve responsiveness and resilience. Engage communities (including children) as agents of climate action and partners in both design and delivery.

### **Pre-arrange finance for shock-responsive social protection**

Use instruments like contingency funds, forecast-based financing and insurance to ensure timely funding for anticipatory and shock-responsive social protection. Design inclusive financial tools in collaboration with social protection actors and at-risk groups so that the instrument is well-suited to the specific programme, resulting in timely and reliable support. Analyse different financing approaches to understand which offers greatest value for money.

### **Link social protection and early action in government processes and policies**

Institutionalise links between social protection and early action by embedding them within social protection and disaster management frameworks, public financial management systems, and national development strategies. This requires political will, cross-sector engagement, and alignment with existing policy, strategy and budgetary processes.

### **Build evidence and learn continuously**

Invest in research, monitoring, and evaluation to better understand what works and fill evidence gaps relating to effectively linking social protection and early action. Promote peer learning, innovation hubs, and collaboration with independent organisations and academic institutions. Ensure evidence-based decision-making and maintain flexibility to refine approaches as new insights emerge.

## Recommended Reading

Complementary resources, including those developed by the Anticipation Hub, especially its Anticipatory Action and Social Protection Working Group, provide further perspectives on connecting anticipatory action with social protection.

- REAP Working Group on Linking Early Action and Social Protection resource folder: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1EjLdop-hJ-H2kGVrPO0Dr2H5\\_gWaf-pS?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1EjLdop-hJ-H2kGVrPO0Dr2H5_gWaf-pS?usp=drive_link)
- World Bank: [https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099061524081527970/pdf/P1807861cd44be06418670151aadabf774c.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*m73yew\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*OTcwNDg3NDA1LjE3MjQxNjQ4MzE](https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099061524081527970/pdf/P1807861cd44be06418670151aadabf774c.pdf?_gl=1*m73yew*_gcl_au*OTcwNDg3NDA1LjE3MjQxNjQ4MzE)
- OECD: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance\\_e161f0c5/full-report.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/full-report.html)
- Humanitarian Action: <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/hyper-prioritized-global-humanitarian-overview-2025-cruel-math-aid-cuts/article/cuts-and-attacks-have-consequences-what-happens-when-humanitarians-cannot-respond>
- Institute of Development Studies (IDS): <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/financing-for-social-protection-in-2025-and-beyond-anyone-any-clearer/>
- OHCHR: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/attacks-world-order-and-global-aid-derailing-decades-progress-poverty-warns>
- UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights: <https://www.srpoverty.org/2025/06/16/weathering-the-storm-poverty-climate-change-and-social-protection/>
- FAO: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/9d745e58-e5d7-49d4-97ef-66a01eecd453/content>
- WFP: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2024-supercharging-social-protection-systems-anticipatory-cash-case-study-fijis>
- WFP: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/linking-anticipatory-action-and-social-protection-fragile-and-conflict-affected>
- WFP: [https://medium.com/@WFP\\_Asia\\_Pacific/in-bangladeshs-jamuna-basin-wfp-s-anticipatory-action-response-breaks-ground-in-the-fight-against-a19be6209204](https://medium.com/@WFP_Asia_Pacific/in-bangladeshs-jamuna-basin-wfp-s-anticipatory-action-response-breaks-ground-in-the-fight-against-a19be6209204)
- Green Climate Fund: <https://www.greenclimate.fund/insights/social-protection-investing-reform-and-resilience>
- Global Centre on Adaptation: <https://llahub.gca.org/articles/6acf169c-1dcd-4e19-a634-12f552173b22>
- Green Climate Fund: <https://www.greenclimate.fund/document/social-protection-and-inclusive-climate-action-review-social-protection-rural-populations>
- Germany: <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/122148/global-shield-information-note-v20-g7.pdf>
- Social Protection: <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/social-protection-solar-system>
- Save the Children: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/link-building-climate-resilience-by-linking-climate-adaptation-and-social-protection>
- Swiss Re Foundation: <https://www.swissrefoundation.org/what-we-do/projects/Climate-solutions/LINK---Building-climate-resilience-by-linking-climate-adaptation--disaster-risk-reduction-and-social-protection-in-Mozambique-.html#:~:text=In%20this%20project%20funded%20by,root%20causes%20of%20their%20vulnerabilities.>





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