



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Colombia

Impact of Early Warning Early Action

Boosting food security and social cohesion on the frontline of the migration crisis



Colombia

Impact of Early Warning Early Action

Boosting food security and social cohesion on the frontline of the migration crisis

REQUIRED CITATION

FAO. 2019. *Colombia, Impact of Early Warning Early Action*. Rome.

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this information product do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concerning the legal or development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The mention of specific companies or products of manufacturers, whether or not these have been patented, does not imply that these have been endorsed or recommended by FAO in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

The views expressed in this information product are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of FAO.

© FAO, 2019



Some rights reserved. This work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO licence (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/igo/legalcode/legalcode>).

Under the terms of this licence, this work may be copied, redistributed and adapted for non-commercial purposes, provided that the work is appropriately cited. In any use of this work, there should be no suggestion that FAO endorses any specific organization, products or services. The use of the FAO logo is not permitted. If the work is adapted, then it must be licensed under the same or equivalent Creative Commons license. If a translation of this work is created, it must include the following disclaimer along with the required citation: “This translation was not created by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). FAO is not responsible for the content or accuracy of this translation. The original English edition shall be the authoritative edition.”

Disputes arising under the licence that cannot be settled amicably will be resolved by mediation and arbitration as described in Article 8 of the licence except as otherwise provided herein. The applicable mediation rules will be the mediation rules of the World Intellectual Property Organization <http://www.wipo.int/amc/en/mediation/rules> and any arbitration will be conducted in accordance with the Arbitration Rules of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL).

Third-party materials. Users wishing to reuse material from this work that is attributed to a third party, such as tables, figures or images, are responsible for determining whether permission is needed for that reuse and for obtaining permission from the copyright holder. The risk of claims resulting from infringement of any third-party-owned component in the work rests solely with the user.

Sales, rights and licensing. FAO information products are available on the FAO website (www.fao.org/publications) and can be purchased through publications-sales@fao.org. Requests for commercial use should be submitted via: www.fao.org/contact-us/licence-request. Queries regarding rights and licensing should be submitted to: copyright@fao.org.

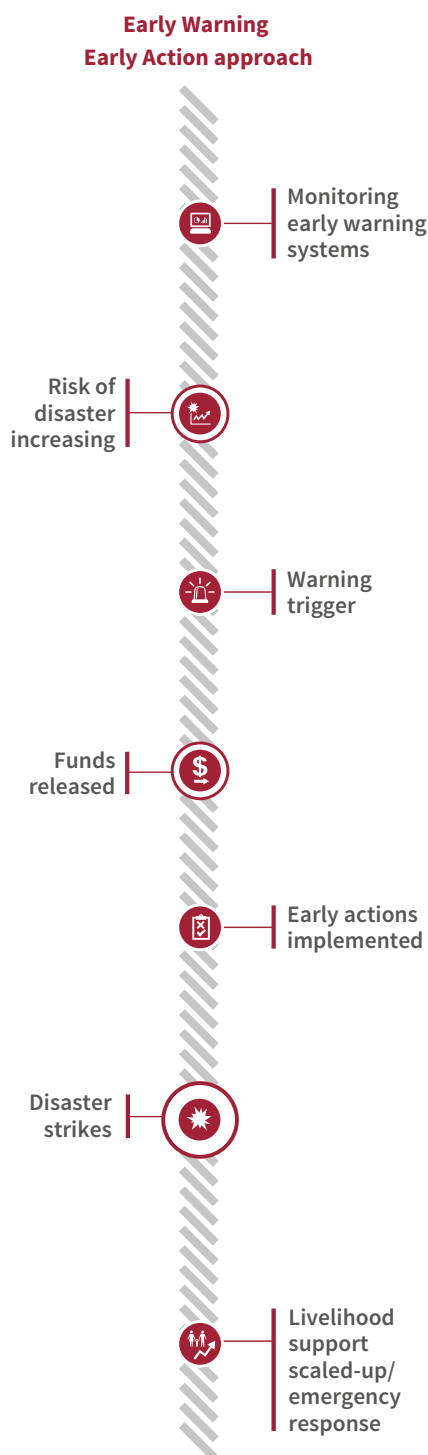
Photo cover: ©FAO/Colombia

Contents

From Early Warning to Early Action.....	1
Challenges for La Guajira	2
Triggers for early action	5
Deciding when and how to intervene	6
Return on investment	10
The impact on food security and nutrition.....	11
Families' perceptions.....	12
Listening to what farming households had to say	13
From early action to long-term resilience	17
Social cohesion and the benefits of acting early	18
Lessons learned	19



From Early Warning to Early Action



The intensity and frequency of natural hazards and conflicts is increasing, and they are leaving in their wake an unprecedented level of humanitarian needs. Natural hazards alone occur nearly five times as often today as 40 years ago. The number of people displaced by conflict, meanwhile, is the highest ever recorded, and millions more are driven to migrate out of necessity.

Not surprisingly, the impact on local economies, on people's lives and their livelihoods has similarly increased. In some of the worst-hit places, it can seem unrelenting. One crisis will follow another, every time stripping away at the hard-earned but limited assets of the poorest and most vulnerable. Along with their assets, it deprives people of their self-reliance and their dignity.

Globally, expanding needs, competing priorities and limited resources call for new tools to make humanitarian interventions as wise and effective as possible. This ensures that the impacts of crises are limited before they can grow into even more devastating and costly disasters.

Support at the right time can protect and empower people, giving them the confidence to keep going or to resume their livelihoods. Investing in early action also means FAO can help shelter longer-term development gains and strengthen resilience.

That's why FAO has been a long-time advocate of forward-looking interventions and works closely with governments and partners in the humanitarian and scientific community to anticipate crises before they reach a crest.

Its Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) approach translates warning signs into anticipatory actions. Every quarter, FAO's EWEA report ranks risks by their likelihood and potential impact on food security and agriculture. It also identifies options for intervention.

That is when FAO's Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities (SFERA) comes into play and through its Early Action Window makes funds available to respond rapidly to an unfolding crisis. Along the way, it draws on FAO's greatest asset – its technical knowledge and expertise in supporting rural livelihoods.

Early actions are varied and flexible. They can range from cash transfers that help fishing communities store their nets ahead of a cyclone to livestock treatments that keep herds healthy through a drought. Early action may build flood defences that protect crops against a severe rainy season, or provide agricultural inputs and technical skills to boost food production ahead of potential food crises.

This study analyses the outcomes of monitoring early warning signs related to drought and mass migration and taking targeted early actions in northern Colombia between 2018 and 2019. It evaluates their effectiveness and quantifies the benefits of acting early.

Challenges for La Guajira

Some households have grown to over 30 people. And many families are still expecting the arrival of more relatives.

Colombia's northern neighbour Venezuela has slipped into a deep economic crisis that has sent more than 4 million people across borders in search of food and stability. It has been the fastest movement of people in Latin America's recent history and it has affected Colombia more than any other country in the region.

Some 1.4 million migrants have so far registered in Colombia – real numbers are likely even higher. Many have settled in bordering areas like La Guajira, where communities have opened their doors to Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees alike, sharing homes and meals.

Some households have grown to over 30 people and many families are still expecting the arrival of more relatives in the months to come. This is not only putting a strain on individual families but also on locally available resources, like land and water.

La Guajira is the driest province of Colombia and many communities have struggled with a history of chronic food insecurity and malnutrition, even before the current migration crisis. This has particularly been true for indigenous people like the Wayúu, who make up a third of the population in this part of Colombia and who frequently lack access to public services.

Rearing sheep and goats is a mainstay for Wayúu families. But lately, the need to feed more people has driven many to start selling or eating their



productive animals – one of many negative coping strategies families resort to in times of crisis.

Across communities on the Venezuela border, the influx of people has also resulted in an excess of workers, which has driven down wages and put pressure on communities.

The crisis in La Guajira comes at a time of transition for Colombia. For more than 50 years, violent conflict threatened food security and stability in the country's rural areas. During this time, much of the country's 22 million hectares of arable land lay abandoned.

Since 2016, the Colombian government has worked hard to cement the formal peace it signed with armed rebels by investing heavily in rural areas. This includes land reform that gives farmers access to fields, along with tools, training and community resources like seed banks and water wells.

Building resilient rural livelihoods and communities has been a key strategy for lifting Colombia's rural areas out of poverty and maintaining peace. Responding early when vulnerable communities face stress is a way to protect and continue the progress Colombia has made and harness agriculture's potential as a driver of development.





Triggers for early action

Border communities would soon be in an impossible situation: having to feed even more people with even fewer resources.

To find out exactly what the impact of migration from Venezuela had been on Colombia's rural border communities, FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) conducted a mission in June 2018 into the departments of La Guajira, Arauca and Norte de Santander. The mission sought to assess what kinds of pressures these host communities were experiencing and to what extent families had started to use negative coping strategies.

The results showed a marked deterioration of the food security in border areas, particularly for the indigenous people in the department of La Guajira. This was, unsurprisingly, mainly owing to growing needs, coupled with lower family incomes. Wages had been declining in part as a result of the growing number of unskilled low-wage labourers settling in their communities.

The survey showed that families grew by four people on average. All said, they consumed less food than before the Venezuela crisis. Families also grew far fewer crops and produced less from their own animals – crop production was down 45 percent, while milk and meat production was barely half of what it was before. Crops had failed in hot weather and seeds were running out. Sheep and goats were used for slaughter rather than production. The remaining animals were getting weaker as a result of shrinking feed and pasture. Together, this meant families had to spend more money on buying food. Where before the crisis they purchased just over half of their food, by 2018 two-thirds came from outside of their own farm.

Against this background, FAO began its early action intervention in September 2018. Three factors, in particular, built up the key evidence to act early.

For one, the migration stream into Colombia showed no signs of letting up. In fact, FAO and others in the humanitarian community foresaw a deterioration in the economic situation in Venezuela and an increase in people crossing the border. This led FAO to call for immediate action in its EWEA July–September 2018 Quarterly Report.

Secondly, during the same three-month timespan as the report, there was growing evidence that drought was likely going to affect La Guajira's next planting season. The International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) released various weather forecasts that showed that La Guajira was likely to experience below-average rainfall and high temperatures that would affect the growing season of the crops. Without support, another failed harvest was likely. Together, this suggested that border communities would soon find themselves in an impossible situation where they would have to feed even more people with even fewer resources.

This added urgency to the third factor: FAO had evidence that food security in the area was already declining and would continue to do so under the forecast increase of migration pressures.

It was clear that early action was required to protect families' livelihoods and put them in a better position to support themselves through the crisis.

Deciding when and how to intervene

Trainers spoke the Wayúu language and combined traditional knowledge with new techniques.

FAO acted in two stages. First, its Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities quickly released USD 400 000 for early action to support 600 households in the municipalities of Manaure, Albania, Maicao, Uribia and Riohacha in La Guajira. The Fund was key to releasing this initial money quickly. The number of households was later increased to 1000, some 7000 people, thanks to extra funds from the United Nation's (UN) Central Emergency and Rehabilitation Fund (CERF) and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency.

In all communities, the intervention's goal was to rapidly boost local food production and help families protect the assets they still had. This would enable them to maintain a healthy diet for themselves and the relatives that had already arrived from Venezuela. Increasing food production would also soften the impact of more people arriving in the months to come and prevent the humanitarian crisis from becoming worse.

After talking to families, FAO identified four activities that would make an immediate difference in La Guajira: establishment of community fields for rapid crop production, distribution of seeds and agricultural tools to individual households, animal health support, and rehabilitation of water infrastructure. The approach followed the rapid recovery model for agricultural production, a strategy devised together with the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Disaster Risk Management Unit.

FAO began by setting up Community Production Centres where families and agronomists exchanged knowledge and applied good practices for quickly producing a diverse range of crops. Families received a variety of short-cycle crop seeds that would produce nutritious food within three months of planting. This action coincided with direct food assistance from WFP, to cover immediate needs and ensure families would use their seeds for planting and not cooking. Among the dozen types of drought-resistant seeds were a variety of vegetables, staples like cassava and maize, and different kinds of beans to create a more diverse and nutritious diet.

Another important feature of the intervention were the animal health brigades. These were teams dispatched to communities to improve the condition of livestock and increase their number.

Animal health workers visited participating communities at regular intervals to vaccinate herds, treat sick animals and give them the necessary vitamins to keep livestock fit and productive. FAO, in addition, distributed animal feed and supplements. Wayúu families were used to buying livestock supplies, like salt blocks, themselves. But many families had stopped investing in their animals and were instead spending more money on extra food for their growing households.

For these activities to bear fruit, access to water was critical. That is why FAO rehabilitated 18 local water supply systems, with the support of Action Against Hunger. This gave families better access to drinking water for themselves and their animals. The rehabilitated wells were also connected to micro-irrigation systems that supported efficient water management in the Community Production Centres.



© FAO/Colombia

Finally, FAO worked with local agronomists and animal health workers to provide ongoing training to beneficiary families. The trainers, who also belong to these communities and spoke the Wayúu language, combined the traditional, ancestral knowledge of communities in this part of Colombia with new techniques to increase crop yields in harsh weather and better care for their animals. Many of these workshops took place at Community Production Centres, where beneficiary families would come together to produce food on test plots and put new knowledge into practice.

Early Warning Early Action project in Colombia

June 2018
a rapid needs assessment raises concerns about the effects of migration on food security in La Guajira



weather forecasts raise alarm about drought affecting the upcoming cropping season

FAO's EWEA Report on Food Security and Agriculture calls for early action to curb the impact of migration and drought



September 2018



FAO acts early to boost food production and protect assets of vulnerable families

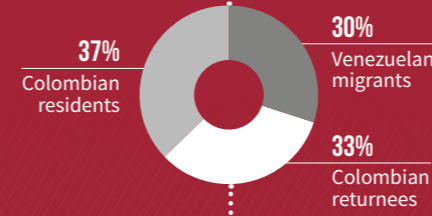


funds released from SFERA Early Action Window + extra funds from CERF and Brazilian Cooperation Agency



The project

1 003 vulnerable households



targeted municipalities: Riohacha, Manaure, Albania, Maicao, Uribia



18 rehabilitated water systems



rapid food production through 17 Community Production Centres



12 500 treated animals



trainings on agronomic practices, livestock management and nutritional education



Benefits to households



Return on Investment

For every USD 1 spent on livelihood interventions, households had a return of USD 2.6



USD 1 351

in avoided damage and loss for each target household



Resilience

beneficiaries of early actions are more resilient than non-beneficiaries



Food Security

households frequently consumed more diversified foods and avoided reducing the number of meals eaten per day



Social Cohesion

74 percent of beneficiaries said their relationship with other groups in their community improved



Crops

USD 40 avoided yield loss

USD 145 larger cultivated area

USD 76 output from community production centers



Livestock

USD 669 improved animal conditions

USD 83 increased milk production

USD 33 increased birth rates

USD 305 avoided animal mortality

the value of animals saved is sufficient to purchase **11 goats or sheep**



4 days

of fresh vegetables each week for beneficiary households, compared to 2.4 days in the control group



+0.5 litre of extra milk

for every child under the age of 5

this corresponds to 54% of their daily protein requirement and 21% of their daily calorie requirement

Return on investment

Because their livestock were stronger and more productive, each family added USD 669 to the value of their herd.

FAO was keen to know the full impact of its intervention on the communities that participated. That's why in June 2019 the agency sent a team to conduct interviews and surveys with families in La Guajira after the project had ended. FAO interviewed families who benefited from the actions, as well as families who didn't. This way, it could compare and better gauge the impact of early action.

It measured how much more food households produced, how many new animals were born and what losses families avoided by keeping their livestock healthy and their fields irrigated. But it also asked families about less tangible impacts, including how the intervention changed social relations in their communities.

In the case of La Guajira, the numbers showed that every dollar that FAO spent on early action to support vulnerable families generated USD 2.6 in benefits for these households.

Animal interventions, in particular, were very successful. Thanks to the animal health brigades and early feed distribution, fewer animals died and herds were stronger and healthier. They also produced more milk and gave birth at a higher rate. This is especially important among vulnerable Wayúu communities, which rely heavily on small livestock for food and income.

In all, FAO supported more than 12 500 sheep, goats and cattle. The average value of animals that were saved from death was USD 305 per family – equivalent to 11 goats or sheep, or 1 cow. What's more, the fact that livestock were stronger and more productive than before added some USD 669 to the value of each family's herd.

The survey also showed that beneficiary families cultivated a larger portion of agricultural land than other families and grew a broader variety of nutritious foods throughout the intervention, regardless of the ongoing drought.

The intervention had positive ripple effects in the wider community, too, bringing Colombian and Venezuelan families together around a common goal. Community Production Centres became hubs for learning and exchange of ideas, and beneficiaries shared new skills with their neighbours outside of the project. It is reasonable to expect that yields and production will further increase through time thanks to this and to the fact that families will gradually specialize in the crops that do especially well in their fields.



©FAO/Colombia

The impact on food security and nutrition

Almost all families who participated – some 97 percent – had an acceptable food consumption score.

Families, by and large, ate more frequently and more diverse food, and their intake of meat and vegetables went up markedly. Almost all families who participated – some 97 percent – had an acceptable food consumption score.

Because animals were more productive, children under five drank about half a litre of milk more per day, adding necessary protein to their diet at a critical stage in their development. The contribution of early action to children's nutrition is crucial in La Guajira, a department that experienced high rates of child malnutrition deaths over the last decade, especially among indigenous communities. The additional milk consumed corresponds roughly to 21 percent of daily calorie requirement and 54 percent of daily protein requirement of a 5-year old child.

A key goal of early actions is also to reduce the frequency of negative coping strategies that families adopt when faced with lack of sufficient food. Early action, in other words, curbs food insecurity before it turns critical. Families who participated in the intervention were significantly less likely to resort to negative coping strategies, like skipping meals and reducing the size of portions than other families were.

Families' perceptions

Participants were keen to pass on their new knowledge to other farmers outside of their village.

To understand how participating families experienced the project, FAO held focus group discussions with host communities, returnees and migrants. This was an opportunity to canvas how effective the early action really was to them. The discussions often went beyond the mere assessment of project benefits and challenges. They also touched on the broader socioeconomic context in La Guajira and the hopes and expectations of the population for the future.

The rehabilitation of water sources made a major difference to the way families could access water, and it came up frequently in conversations. So did the animal health interventions. Raising goats and sheep is more than a livelihood in this part of Colombia – it is an essential part of the families' culture and tradition. Having healthy animals is a source of pride as well as a source of nutrition and income.

And because families could see the immediate effects of the new planting techniques they learned in their fields, they were keen to pass on that knowledge to their children and other farmers outside of their village.

Families also spoke positively about the fact that women and men were equally engaged in the activities and received equal benefits. This was a welcome change from a time when women had a less prominent role in agriculture.

The focus groups also provided a space for families to offer ideas for future interventions. Many suggested expanding community production centers to reach more families, and to establish new ones in other communities. What's more, participants showed interest in poultry and aquaculture and were keen for support in establishing micro-enterprises to add value to their agricultural products and increase their income.



Listening to what farming households had to say

Fidelia Pana

Community: Guayabal



For her, it was a chance to improve her crop production. For her daughter, it was a means to build a new life.

As a long-time leader in her community of Guayabal, Fidelia Pana is used to rolling up her sleeves. So when her daughter arrived from Venezuela a few months ago with her two children in tow seeking shelter, it was no different. “She walked along the border,” Fidelia says of her daughter’s ordeal. “At first it was difficult because she had nothing, but of course my whole family provided support.”

Her story is a common one in La Guajira where many have seen daughters, sons and cousins leave for new opportunities in Venezuela, only to be driven back a few years later by the economic crisis.

Both Fidelia and her daughter connected with FAO through the EWEA intervention. For Fidelia, it was a chance to improve and increase her crop production. For her daughter, it was a means to build a new life.

“Now she’s working with us at the Community Production Centre,” says Fidelia. At the centre, the two women, together with other families from the community, experiment with new ways of working the land and caring for their small herd of goats.

Fidelia, who is 61, says that through the project she learned how to better sow, to transplant and to produce organic fertilizer. While water remains a major problem in this arid part of Colombia, the new drip irrigation system FAO installed helped a lot in getting a decent production off the ground. And instead of one harvest a year, they’ll now be able to have two.

In just two months, her family had already harvested cabbage, eggplant and chili pepper, some of which she’d never grown or eaten before. In the past, she would not have known how to cook some of them, but thanks to the nutrition training and recipes she received, she and her daughter now make them into tasty meals for the family.

Of the support the project provided, the animal health intervention was particularly valuable to her, says Fidelia. The extra animal feed they received did a lot to make her livestock stronger and fitter, and thanks to new skills she learned from the FAO veterinarian, she is now able to provide basic healthcare to her livestock when needed.

In all, Fidelia is very happy with the progress she and her community have made, she says, not only on the production side. It has also brought them closer together and sparked a sense of solidarity.

Angel Enrique Gonzalez

Community: San José



“Without water, there’s nothing.”

Back in Maracaibo, Venezuela, Angel Gonzalez remembers struggling to provide for his family with the income he made as a herder.

One of his sons was already living across the Colombian border in San José and working on a small piece of land there. So when the crisis made life impossible for him, the father of seven decided to follow with his family.

They were not alone. All together, four Venezuelan families arrived in the small community within the span of a year looking for stability.

But the environment is harsh. San José is located in a part of La Guajira where there are recurrent floods owing to the Ranchería river that frequently overflows. Between June and November farms are battered by windstorms, and all throughout the department of La Guajira, high temperatures often lead to long drought. This means shortages of drinking water and risk of forest fires.

That’s why to Angel and many of his neighbours, water management was the most significant component of the FAO project. Together, they learned to use their water resources more efficiently, including with a new drip irrigation system that uses the minimum to grow healthy plants. What’s more, the new water supply system that was installed for the community runs on solar energy, which means water will be flowing to their fields for a long time.

That’s not the case for most people in the department of La Guajira, where only four percent of the rural population have access to drinking water. In this part of Colombia, women and children sometimes walk up to seven hours a day to collect water. “Without water, there’s nothing,” says Angel.

Beyond water, the early action intervention also supported him and his family with drought-resistant seeds and tools to produce part of their daily food, he says. Like a number of other families in the project, they received laying hens, as well, which means they have daily fresh eggs to add to their diet or to sell in the community.

Building a livelihood on the land has made him feel at home in San José, Angel says, and he feels he has found a footing in the community. “People have been nice to me here and I’m happy with what I do.”

Alina Rieta

Community: Montelara



“In spite of everything, being here is a relief.”

When Alina Rieta returned to Colombia, she left behind the life she'd built in Venezuela for 30 years. Though she's originally from the Colombian department of Cordoba, when she came back she settled in Montelara, just across the border in La Guajira.

The house she lives in now has only one room. This makes it hard for her to host her five children and two grandchildren, one of which lives with a disability. But they make due the best they can. Often it means the children will return to Venezuela for stretches of time, because there is not enough space for everybody.

Back in Venezuela she had a food business and lived well before the shortages began. When she first came to Montelara, like many, she lived off occasional jobs. Agriculture was not really seen as a livelihood, she says.

Alina was not a farmer at all and had never learned to cultivate the land. But that has changed. Being part of the early action project, she says, taught her everything she needs to know about the stages of production – from preparing the land to sowing, applying fertilizers, irrigation, and harvesting. Even more than the supplies and tools, it's the training component that was most useful to her, she says. “We are learning to live together, cultivating together in the Community Production Centre.” And that's enabled her to care for her family.

She'd still like to wake up in her old home, she says. But despite her longing for her old life in Venezuela, she's hopeful these days: “Agriculture helped me to have a roof. And in spite of everything, being here is a relief. The project has been a breath of fresh air.”



From early action to long-term resilience

Families scored better in Adaptive Capacity and Assets – the two main determinants of resilience.

Early actions are most relevant when they empower communities to reduce future risks and shed light on the root causes of vulnerability in hazard-prone areas. This, in turn, translates into more resilient communities and fewer people in need of emergency assistance.

Since 2008, FAO has been at the forefront of efforts to measure resilience to food insecurity and has pioneered the development and use of the Resilience Index Measurement and Analysis (RIMA).

RIMA is a quantitative way to analyse how households cope with shocks and stressors. Having this information is critical for formulating policies, programmes and investments for food security that are rooted in evidence on the ground.

In La Guajira, FAO measured the resilience of participating families and control households with the help of a RIMA questionnaire and assigned them all a resilience score. That score is based on various food security indicators, as well as factors like access to basic services and social safety nets, the number of productive assets they own, and their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

The results show that beneficiary families today are significantly more resilient than control households. What stands out from the analysis is that families who participated in the FAO intervention scored better in both Adaptive Capacity and Assets, which are the two main determinants of resilience in the region.

The fact that beneficiary families were growing a far bigger variety of crops and harvested more food had a lot to do with this. Each beneficiary family, on average, harvested five kinds of crops and just over 115 kg in the previous season. Families in the control group harvested only 0.6 kinds of crops, on average, and less than 35 kg. Participating families also came out of the intervention with almost twice as much livestock than the control group.

The arid land that was transformed into productive fields will serve families well beyond a single planting season. The fact that their livestock gave birth at higher rates also suggests increases in future production and income.

Together with the training they received, this puts them on a much better footing to absorb the steady influx of people that is likely to continue for some time to come. It also allows them to anticipate and ride out future climatic shocks, like drought, which are cyclical in this part of the region and therefore bound to affect them again.

Building capacity to cope with predictable shocks is a hallmark of effective early action and one of the foundations for resilient livelihoods. This is the true strength of FAO's resilience approach – drawing on information, analysis and experience to establish strong agriculture-based livelihoods even in times of crisis.



©FAO/Colombia

Social cohesion and the benefits of acting early

Early action helped strengthen social cohesion among hosts, returnees and migrants.

The right kind of intervention, implemented at the right time, can do more than improve food security and diets – it can bolster the social fibre of communities. Successful interventions ease tensions over resources and build relationships between different groups through shared activities and experiences.

Almost all migrants interviewed had migrated because of food scarcity or high food costs, insufficient access to health services, lack of employment, or lack of access to education. Early actions in La Guajira were designed to boost social cohesion between hosts and migrants coming to the area without land and without job opportunities.

To measure how its early action intervention affected social cohesion within the communities that received support, FAO asked families directly. Almost 75 percent of the participating households in La Guajira said their relationship with other groups had improved in the last 12 months. In the control group, on the other hand, that number was less than 40 percent. This suggests that the type of activities FAO implemented in La Guajira can help challenge negative perceptions that host communities and migrants may have about each other.

This is an important finding for anyone working to sustain peace at a local level in these vulnerable parts of Colombia – and especially in light of the latest migration data. About a third of families that took part in the early action intervention said they had received new arrivals from Venezuela in the last 12 months. Those households grew by four people on average.

But the vast majority of interviewed households said that they still had family members in Venezuela who are planning to come to Colombia in the next year. This means that efforts to boost food security, ease tensions and build relationships between host communities and newcomers will only become more important in the months to come.

Lessons learned

FAO's consistent presence in rural areas was key to the success of the intervention.

Supporting agriculture makes a difference

FAO is one of the few organizations supporting vulnerable people in rural areas, which are bearing the brunt of unregistered arrivals during the current migration crisis. The fact that FAO had a consistent presence in La Guajira helped build trust within the local community and was key to the success of the intervention. So was working with the local indigenous population in a collaborative way that respected their ancestral knowledge. The benefits families continue to reap from FAO's investment in their livelihoods shows that timely support in agriculture can protect assets and boost food security for struggling families. And it does so in ways that prevent more costly interventions later.

Protecting livelihoods can build social cohesion

Acting early to protect farming livelihoods can improve community relations between different groups. Hosts, returnees and migrants managed to know each other better by working in the same field towards the common objective of boosting food production to feed their families.

Early action can soften the impact of mass migration

It's possible to anticipate and soften the blow of disruptive events like mass migration when organizations have solid EWEA systems in place. Thanks to regular monitoring, FAO understood the rapidly changing situation in Colombia and the region, both in regard to drought and migration flows. Partners like the International Organization for Migration and the UN Refugee Agency provided FAO with data that painted a more complete picture of the different pressures rural communities would be facing. The experience in La Guajira showed how important it is to study the links between climate-related events and socioeconomic changes to identify critical moments for action. Getting regular information from people and experts in communities, likewise, is key to keeping warning indicators and action triggers up to date and connected to actual experiences on the ground.

Protecting livelihoods early shields against future shocks

Investing early to protect and build up the livelihoods of farming families can do more than cover their immediate needs – it helps boost their resilience over time. With the right kind of intervention, early action increases the capacity of households to absorb future shocks and adapt to changing conditions. In La Guajira, FAO's strong emphasis on training and knowledge transfer, alongside seeds and tools, was key. The fact that beneficiary families are now able to farm larger pieces of land in extremely arid and isolated areas, and feel confident they can continue that production, puts them in a better position to feed their families through hard times in months and years to come.

From early action to development and peace


All evidence suggests the situation in Colombia will remain complex for some time. Beyond the high number of migrants settling in the country, Colombia still has a large population of internally displaced people and many rural areas continue to struggle with persistent poverty. Armed groups, meanwhile, remain active in parts of the country – a reminder that peace is still fragile and needs continuous nurturing. Years of experience in crisis zones have shown that peace and food security are two sides of the same coin – one cannot exist without the other. Agriculture, meanwhile, has time and time again proven to be a major catalyst for the transition from conflict and crisis to sustainable peace, and ultimately to long-term development.

With an unprecedented level of humanitarian needs driven largely by protracted crises, FAO is actively framing its interventions within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Where previous models for responding to humanitarian emergencies addressed the immediate needs of communities, FAO promotes a paradigm that involves the emergency, recovery and development phases, with a special emphasis on early action and the role agriculture can play in the transition to sustainable peace. That's why investing in agriculture and in FAO's ongoing work in Colombia remains a critical investment in future stability.



©FAO/Colombia

Acting early safeguards lives and livelihoods, builds resilience to future shocks, and eases pressure on strained humanitarian resources.



FAO's Early Warning Early Action uses risk analysis and forecasts to trigger interventions before a crisis escalates into a humanitarian emergency.

With the financial support of



Early Warning Early Action
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

ewea@fao.org
www.fao.org/emergencies/fao-in-action/ewea
[@FAOEmergencies](https://twitter.com/FAOEmergencies)