



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

In their words

Farmers' stories on getting ahead of disasters



In their words

Farmers' stories on getting ahead of disasters



Anticipatory action is the practice of forecasting disasters and acting before they occur or reach their peak. The goal, in a nutshell, is to use data on weather, conflicts and many other stress factors to provide aid proactively and help communities protect themselves before they get hit hard. That way, they can hold on to their key assets – especially those that provide them food and income.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been working in this growing area of disaster management for more than five years and is helping to bring it into the mainstream of humanitarian programming worldwide. During this time, study after study has shown that anticipatory action is often cheaper than response and provides more benefits to families. It's also a more dignified way of providing aid because it doesn't wait for people to become destitute to extend a helping hand.

But statistics and figures can fail to convey the actual experiences of the farmers and families we serve. That's why listening to communities is at the heart of FAO's work, before, during and after they receive livelihood support. Ultimately, it's them who can describe best what difference it makes when assistance is provided early.

Here are some of their stories.



Context

In the riverine northwest of Bangladesh, floods are a frequent occurrence that can trap families in a cycle of loss and difficult recovery. By measuring water level changes in key rivers, FAO and partners were able to act before the historical 2020 monsoon floods reached their peak and provided farming families like Kokila Akhter and Samiul Islam's with airtight storage drums to store seeds, food and clean water.

Kokila Akhter and Samiul Islam

Kurigram, Bangladesh

Kokila Akhter was three months pregnant when the Brahmaputra-Jamuna river ran over and flooded her house and water well. Like most years during the rainy season, she quickly packed what she could and left with her husband, three-year-old son and mother-in-law to ride out the floods in a nearby shelter. But the food and income from the nuts they had planted on a small, rented piece of land had vanished with the waters.

One thing that was different about Akhter's sheltering experience this year was the plastic storage drum she received from FAO just ahead of the floods. Now she uses it to store her rice seeds in a dry place while she waits for the end of the rainy season. But in the early days of the floods, when her well was flooded with dirty water, it served another important function.



©FAO/Saikat Mojumder

“

“Drinking safe water helped me not to get sick and to stay healthy in my pregnancy period.”

Kokila Akhter

”

“I stored safe water in the drum to drink and for cooking. Drinking safe water helped me not to get sick and to stay healthy in my pregnancy period,” she says. In the shelter, the couple shared their water with other families too. “So they all benefited from it,” says Akhter.

But during the monsoon season, the family has struggled to make ends meet. “Sometimes we don’t have enough money to cultivate the land,” says her husband Samiul Islam, “when there’s a lack of seed and the seed becomes really pricey.”

Being able to safely store seed until the planting season allows farmers like them to take advantage of periods when seed prices are low and increases the likelihood they’ll be able to plant for the season. “The drum is good for storing seed,” says Islam. “So we will use it that way.”



©FAO/P. Khangalkhuu

Context

On Mongolia's steppe, many of the poorest herders cannot afford the extra fodder needed to keep their livestock alive through the *dzud*, a particularly harsh winter that prevents cattle from grazing because of ice and snow. Market conditions for meat exports and cashmere get worse and vulnerable farmers are forced to take out crippling high-interest loans and eventually move to cities, destitute. FAO provided herders like Anabish Jamransuren with nutritional supplements to bring their livestock through the 2017/18 winter and sell their products at a higher price.

Anabish Jamsransuren

Dashinchilen, Mongolia

A loan from two years ago was still hanging over the heads of Anabish Jamransuren and his wife. They have now managed to pay it off, as a result of FAO's anticipatory action programme.

Herder households who kept goats for their cashmere like the Anabish family were among those who received feed and nutritional supplements before the worst of the extreme weather hit. It enabled them to keep their livestock healthy and as a result comb their goats for cashmere in the spring, when prices are highest.

“Without this support, we would have had to buy more food for our animals with an advance, set against the money we hoped to earn from our cashmere production. These loans are a huge burden and I have been spared another one,” Anabish says.

He bought 100 bales of hay in preparation for the expected harsh winter, but looking ahead he is planning to buy double that amount next year and without going into debt.

At 56 years of age, Anabish and his wife have four children to support and every bit of income counts to them. Cashmere is an important source of income in Mongolia and provides families with materials for clothes.

“The feed from FAO made our livestock so much stronger. Their milk yield increased and the cashmere we harvested from the goats was really clean and good,” he says.

By June 2018, cashmere prices had dropped 15 percent, but Anabish and his family were able to avoid this loss of income by selling early. This also set them on a stronger footing to face other *dzuds* in the future.

“

“The feed from FAO made our livestock so much stronger. Their milk yield increased and the cashmere we harvested from the goats was really clean and good.”

Anabish Jamsransuren

”



©FAO/P. Khangalkhuu



©FAO

Context

During the economic crisis in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in 2018 and 2019, border towns in northern Colombia began seeing an unprecedented influx of migrants and returnees seeking food, shelter and employment. The anticipated wave of migration was expected to put pressure on food security in already vulnerable communities. The anticipatory action in Colombia set up Community Production Centres where newcomers and locals like Fidelia Pana could grow food together and learn better farming practices.

Fidelia Pana

Guayabal, Colombia

As a long-time leader in her community of Guayabal in La Guajira, Colombia, Fidelia Pana is used to rolling up her sleeves. So when her daughter arrived from Venezuela a few months earlier with her two children in tow seeking shelter, it was no different. “She walked along the border,” Pana 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 the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, only to be driven back a few years later by the economic crisis.

Both Pana and her daughter participated in FAO’s anticipatory action intervention. For Pana, it was a chance to improve and increase her crop production.

“

“[My daughter] had nothing, but of course the whole family provided support. Now she is working with us at the Community Production Centre.”

Fidelia Pana

”

For her daughter, it was a means to build a new life. “Now she’s working with us at the Community Production Centre,” says Pana. 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.

Pana, 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.

The fact that the Community Centres were set up ahead of the influx of returnees meant that people were able to learn new skills and boost food production before food security got worse. And they were able to accept new arrivals without worrying for the future.

In just two months, Pana and her family had already harvested cabbage, eggplant and chili pepper, some of which she’d never grown or eaten before, she says.

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 Pana. 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.

She is very happy with the progress she and her community have made, she says. And that’s not only on the production side. It has also brought them closer together as a village, says Pana, and sparked a sense of solidarity.



©FAO/Tony Karumba

Context

Droughts are a common occurrence in Kenya that can push pastoralists to sell off their livestock because there is simply too little grassland to go around. Often the animals go to market when they are already weak and sick, and therefore bring in little money. FAO monitored livestock movements, vegetation and rainfall in Kenya, and as soon as signs pointed to the likelihood of another drought, distributed feed to pastoralists like Alice Katiwe to protect her key breeding stock and avoid having to sell her animals.

Alice Katiwe

Kwale, Kenya

In all her 46 years, Alice Katiwe had never endured a drought of such intensity. Neither had the older folks of her village, Tsangatsini. When the drought began to bite hard in January 2017, Katiwe was consumed with worry about her 12 cows.

She grows some maize, chickpeas and amaranth on her one-and-a-quarter-acre plot, but it is her livestock who support her four children and those of her eldest son. Katiwe's cows pay the school fees.

Katiwe lost four to starvation and was forced to sell another as prices slumped from USD 80 to USD 30. Everyone was trying to sell their animals. The four bags of ranch cubes and 30 multi-nutrient blocks Katiwe received from FAO saved her core breeding herd – essentially her life savings.



“

“The elders all agreed that this was the worst drought they had ever seen. My cows were emaciated and lost all their strength.”

Alice Katiwe

”

Katiwe saw a distinct improvement in her cows' health almost immediately and her main breeding cow recovered enough to become pregnant.

“I expect her to generate a lot of milk,” Katiwe says. “Before, when she was healthy, she produced well.”

Without the early action from FAO, Katiwe would have lost more of her cows, plunging her and her family into the spiral of poverty, from which it's very hard to escape.

Context

FAO helped vulnerable families in Mindanao Island set up new sources of food and income in the lead up to an El Niño-induced drought. Women like Tintin Sulaiman learned to raise ducks in community farms and received backyard gardening kits with short-cycle seeds ahead of time to grow nutritious vegetables quickly and close to home. Their husbands who were cut off from their rice fields because of spikes in conflict earned an income by participating in cash-for-work projects to rehabilitate local water infrastructure.

Tintin Sulaiman

Datu Saudi Ampatuan, the Philippines

Rice farming and fresh water fishing have been mainstays for Tintin Sulaiman and her family of three. But both activities rely on the constant flow of water.

“My husband usually does the fishing,” she says. “Our main source of income is rice, though. My husband works hard in the fields.”

But this year was different. The rains were sparse and only a limited amount of water flowed into the rice fields. Forecasts showed even drier conditions in the months ahead, threatening the main rice crop. Right around the time Sulaiman’s worries started to grow, FAO intervened and gave her vegetable seeds and a space in a plant nursery with a cooperative.

“I learned how to grow the seedlings, so we were much better off.” Importantly, the seeds were drought-tolerant and could yield with little water.

“

“Eventually, I hope I can save enough so my daughter can finish school.”

Tintin Sulaiman

”

Sulaiman now divides her time between the community farm, where she works collectively with other families, and her own vegetable garden at home, which has become a point of pride for her.

“I love the garden. My husband is not allowed to touch it,” she says cheekily. “He’s only allowed to stand and watch – I manage the garden.”

Her labour is bearing fruit: “With FAO’s help, every two weeks I harvest chillies, okra and eggplant.” She brings in around 4 kg each time, which she uses for cooking, but also to sell in the market.

“I’m saving for the first time, because I don’t buy vegetables at the market. Instead, I make money!”

In addition to vegetables, she sells duck eggs – another income source she was able to build thanks to the 10 ducks she received through the project.

All together, she saves about 200 Philippine peso (PHP), or around USD 4, per week. “I can buy basic things for the house: three bottles of oil for PHP 50, sugar, onions and garlic.”

And her family is eating healthier than before. This is an important point since she’s pregnant with her second child.

“I have eggs and vegetables and now I can buy fruits,” she says. “Instead of choosing between all three, I can have all of them and I can buy medicine for myself and for my baby.”

Her one-year-old daughter is healthy and she really loves the eggs, she says. “She can eat two of them in a day!”

The support came at an important time for her family; her husband’s rice crop was showing signs of stress, and losing yield could strain the family’s finances.

Making things worse, halfway into the FAO’s intervention, Sulaiman’s family was also evacuated because of violent clashes near her house. This meant her husband was banned from visiting his rice field and maintaining it at a crucial time when his rice needed close monitoring.

To prevent further stress on the family, FAO selected Sulaiman’s husband Saidin as part of a cash-for-work project in their community that provided an alternative source of income.



Sulaiman’s vegetable garden and ducks also remained a lifeline throughout her time in the evacuation centre.

She was keen to contribute financially as well, releasing some of the burden from her husband. “I manage the money. When my husband finishes work he brings his earnings to me,” she says.

“Now, I can help. Instead of my husband giving me money to buy things for the house, I can get it. I feel empowered – I am helping with the household.”

“Over the last few months we have been on and off in the barangay halls [evacuation centres]. We can come to our house during the day, but we always have to return when the military says,” she explains.

“We cannot go to the market, so it was useful to quickly go to my garden and harvest fresh food. I don’t want my baby to eat processed foods. So I would cook eggplant and okra to take with us.”

Sulaiman is adamant about putting funds aside, even during the conflict. “I don’t want to spend money on buying food,” she says. “I want to save.”

Right now, she’s saving for emergency needs while she’s pregnant. “Eventually, I hope I can save enough so my daughter can finish school.”



©FAO/Ahmedalidresey Adil

Context

The Sudan is one of the driest countries in Africa, with erratic rainfall, on which most agricultural production depends. Extreme years, where rainfall is either heavy or below-average, are becoming more common than average years. This has a huge impact on those who rely on their livestock and rain-fed agricultural crops. With the animal feed and nutritional supplements supplied by FAO early on, livestock keepers like Khalda Mohammed Ibrahim were able to make it through the 2017/18 drought and provide food and milk for her family.

Khalda Mohammed Ibrahim

Kassala, the Sudan

Khalda Mohammed Ibrahim relies on her small herd of goats and sheep to support her family with essential meat and dairy products.

These are especially important for her young daughter. Just half a litre of milk a day gives a five-year-old child 25 percent of the calories and 65 percent of the protein they need for healthy growth and development.

In past droughts, Ibrahim has travelled from her village, Aroma, to Kassala market to sell charcoal and raise money so she could buy livestock fodder. But the journey is long and the goods – expensive.

“Life would be so hard if our livestock died, we wouldn’t have food or milk for the children,” she said. “When it is dry, I am afraid they will starve – and then we will too.”



©FAO/Ahmed al-Tidreisy Adil

“

“When it is dry, I am afraid my livestock will starve – and then we will too.”

Khalda Mohammed Ibrahim

”

Ibrahim’s family was part of FAO’s anticipatory action project in the Sudan in the spring of 2018 and received feed and nutritional supplements ahead of the peak of the drought, because their animals were their main livelihood.

This anticipatory action allowed Ibrahim to keep her livestock not only alive but healthy. Their milk production increased when typically they would be at their weakest.

“With this help, our livestock were healthy and happy and made more milk,” Ibrahim said. “We could feed the children and ourselves, and sometimes we provided our neighbours with milk.”

FAO's anticipatory action approach uses risk analysis and forecasts to trigger interventions before a crisis escalates into a humanitarian emergency.

Office of Emergencies and Resilience
OER-Director@fao.org | fao.org/emergencies
@FAOEmergencies

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, Italy



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence