You Can’t Blame the Weather: Preventing Hunger in the 2026–27 El Niño

Executive Summary

Why Donors Must Act Now

A coming catastrophe is foreseeable. Its worst outcomes are still avoidable but the window to prevent them is closing.

Donor choices will determine whether the predictable weather pattern of El Niño unfolds into a humanitarian catastrophe. Hunger is not inevitable and cannot be blamed on weather alone when the tools to predict and fight food insecurity are at our fingertips.

El Niño is arriving at a time of intense precarity. Global estimates show that acute food insecurity has not come down from its 2022 peak — from 258 million people to 266 million in 2025, a rise of 3% despite a collapse in data collection coverage — while the funding to meet that need has fallen by 68% over the same period.[i] While needs are increasing and funding is decreasing, women and girls absorb the sharpest edge of every shock,[ii] and the women-led organizations that are often the most effective actors at reaching them, are receiving disproportionately low levels of quality funding.

While the most cost-effective and humane responses are those that are delivered early or in advance of the predictable crisis, there is still time for well-resourced action to be effective in curbing the worst impacts of El Niño. Recent history bears out this fact: in 2022, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted grain and fertilizer markets, a surge of international humanitarian assistance — a 39% jump from the year before — combined with diplomatic efforts helped avert a forecast surge toward 620 million people losing at least one meal a day.[iii] That response was not without flaws, but it showed that early, large-scale, coordinated action can mitigate the worst outcomes and save lives.

By all accounts, humanitarians cannot expect that the scale of support that was mobilized in 2022 will materialize. Reported food-security sector funding has fallen from $12.9 billion in 2022 to $3.7 billion by mid-September 2026. Meanwhile, the drivers of humanitarian needs like conflict, displacement, and high food and fuel prices are now compounded by renewed disruption to food and energy markets stemming from escalating conflict in the Middle East.[iv]

However, the outcome is not predetermined. To meet needs in time, there are several actions that donors must take today, including:

- Release new and additional funding for anticipatory action before seasonal windows around the world close — donors must not rely on reallocating funding that is already committed, they have to fund more and smarter money.
- Protect and provide direct, quality[1] funding to the local and women-led response capacity that delivers assistance in the most impactful and cost-effective way.

[1] Quality funding refers to funding that is flexible, predictable, multiyear, as localized as possible, and which covers fully the direct and indirect costs of implementation.

- Diversify the donor base so no single government's withdrawal determines whether millions of people receive life-saving support.

El Niño Is Here. The Level of Impact Is Still a Choice.

The El Niño is a climate pattern in which unusually warm ocean temperatures in the central and eastern Pacific disrupt rainfall, temperature, and weather patterns worldwide. Its impacts vary as a single country can face both flooding and drought in different places or seasons. And while climate change does not cause El Niño, it is intensifying its effects: El Niño events now unfold against a backdrop of higher baseline temperatures and more extreme weather than in past cycles, making each occurrence more destructive than the last.[v]

Worse Still to Come

−40.3% Projected decline in humanitarian assistance, 2024–26

−44.5% Projected decline in food aid, equal to $2.6 billion

+49 million More people could face acute food insecurity by the end of 2027 as El Niño intensifies

+45 million More people already at risk this year alone from Middle East/Strait of Hormuz-linked spillover

Sources: OECD, ODA Projections for 2026 and the Near-Term (June 2026); UN News, "Strengthening El Niño to push 49 million more people into acute hunger" (5 August 2026); WFP, Middle East/Strait of Hormuz spillover analysis (April 2026).

Critically, these effects are coming during a period of an already historic hunger crisis. In 2025, two simultaneous famines, in Gaza and Sudan, were confirmed in for the first time in the history of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System (IPC).[vi] Around the world, communities have been under extraordinary pressure on multiple fronts: conflict, displacement, high fuel and food prices, debt, and successive climate shocks have left many households with little capacity to absorb another loss.

Women and girls have been telling CARE that they already been coping with these shocks. When food prices rise or water becomes scarce, women commonly reduce their own food intake, take on additional unpaid care and water-collection work, and face greater protection and gender-based violence (GBV) risks — risks that rise in step with hunger, not as a separate trend. CARE estimates that 172.3 million women and girls in 26 El Niño-affected countries are already experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, including 56.2 million facing severe hunger.[vii] CARE's research across seven countries found that roughly three in four women say shocks like drought, floods, and pests are affecting their ability to secure enough food for their families.[viii]

Despite this, women and girls' needs, capacity, and leadership are too often treated as secondary in preparedness and response planning, including in funding decisions. What's more, funding cuts are hollowing out the frontline capacity of the women-led organizations best placed to respond. A 2026 UN Women survey of 855 women-led and women's rights organizations across 52 countries found that 88% report their capacity now falls below current need, 61% say their financial situation is worse than a year ago, and 45% have six months or less of operating funds remaining.[ix]

Impact Case Study: Somalia

Many of the countries most vulnerable to El Niño are entering this period of heightened climate risk with no buffer left. During the last El Niño (2023–2024), floods affected approximately 2.48 million people in Somalia and displaced around 1.2 million; Somalia is again identified by FAO and WFP as facing heightened El Niño-related risk.[x] But before this El Niño's effects have even begun, a June 2026 WFP analysis found that economic spillovers from conflict in the Middle East — including disruption connected to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz — are already driving higher fuel and food prices and eroding household purchasing power.[xi]

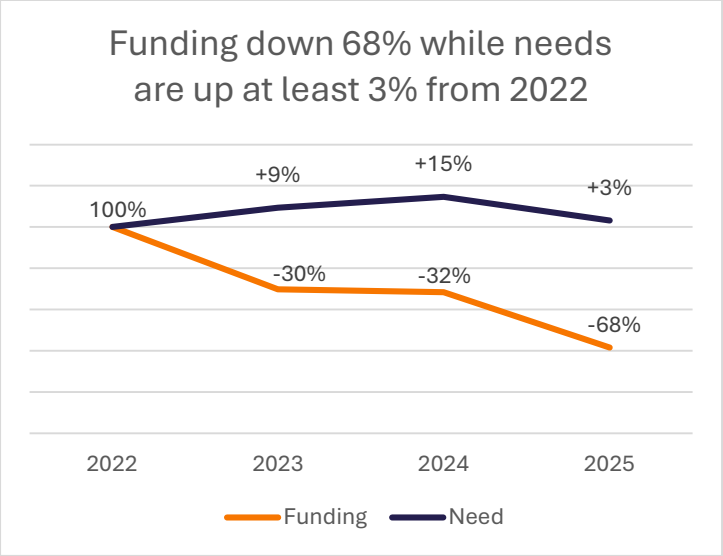
WFP projects that an additional 2.5 million Somalis could become unable to afford a basic food basket, with nearly 60% of households unable to meet essential needs.[xii] Thanks to several seasons of failed rains, CARE's staff in Somalia are observing that women in Somalia are already absorbing these compounding shocks — cutting their own food intake and taking on additional unpaid care work as prices rise faster than incomes.

Changing Outcomes Through Action

The world has already proven that fast, well-resourced action can mitigate a hunger catastrophe.

In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted grain exports, fertilizer markets, and food prices at a time when millions of people were already facing hunger. CARE's 2022 modeling found that 332.8 million of the people at risk from the Ukraine-driven shock were women, who stood to lose 8.5 billion more meals than men had the response not been scaled when it was.[xiii]

The response was large and effective in a variety of measures: a record $43.21 billion in international humanitarian assistance — up 39% from 2021 — helped curb the forecasted surge.[xiv] That funding was reinforced by diplomatic action and by supply-chain adjustments that kept grain moving even as the conflict continued.[xv] While funding arrived late for many experiencing hunger and the global humanitarian funding gap was still 31%, the large-scale mobilization still represented a critical lifeline for 157 million people reached with assistance.[xvi] The food security and nutrition needs that were projected to skyrocket were largely stabilized, and the next year there was only a 9% increase in food security needs, rather than the 17% increase that was projected.[xvii]



Since funding cuts and access have reduced data availability particularly in 2025, needs are likely undercounted. Source: Global Report on Food Crises.

The 2022 response also drew focus on a structural weakness: dependence on a narrow donor base. Between 2016 and 2024, 90% of humanitarian funding for food sectors in food-crisis contexts came from just 16 donors, with half from the United States alone.[xviii] That concentration leaves the entire system exposed when one major donor pulls back. Furthermore, when humanitarian budgets tighten, programming that targets women and girls is consistently among the first line items cut, treated as supplementary rather than what it truly is – core to the response.

Anticipatory action — using forecasts and pre-agreed triggers to release assistance before a shock peaks — is proven, but the gap between building these systems and actually triggering them remains wide. CARE's global review found 154 anticipatory-action frameworks active across 48 countries in 2024, but only 121 activations, reaching just over 17 million people — evidence that investment in frameworks has outpaced investment in keeping them ready to act.[xix] Very few anticipatory-action triggers are currently designed to reach women-headed households specifically, even though they are consistently among the first to lose income once a forecast crisis begins to materialize. And most early warning systems still do not disaggregate their projections by sex, age, disability, and other dimensions of diversity (SADDD), so the scale of the looming impact on women and girls remains systematically underestimated until the crisis is already underway.[xx]

But even if the window for anticipatory action is closing, the evidence is clear that tell us that the earlier responses are still the most cost-effective responses: A joint FAO, WFP, and OCHA review of anticipatory-action programs across ten countries found that every $1 invested before a crisis hits yields up to $7 in avoided losses and added benefits. Beyond cost savings, reaching communities before disaster strikes equips people with the tools to prepare for crisis and avoid harm before suffering can take place. For El Niño, this window to react early is rapidly closing – but there is still time if donors act now.

What Needs to Happen Now: Smart Choices Today for Tomorrow's Outcome

The lesson from 2022 is not that every crisis can be met by reallocating existing money alone — it is that governments acted early, moved resources through systems already in place, treated the warning as a reason to act, and still added new money on top of that. Both are needed again now: faster use of what exists, and new, additional resources on top of it.

1. Release available funding early — and commit new, additional resources. Donors should release available humanitarian, development, climate, and contingency financing now, before seasonal windows close and before forecast impacts become visible in rising hunger. Existing country programs, crisis modifiers, contingency reserves, and flexible grants should flex to meet rapidly changing needs rather than wait for new instruments or fully developed appeals. But reallocating what already exists will not be enough on its own: available resources fall short of what is needed, and donors should pair early release with new and additional pledges — not treat reallocation as a substitute for them.

2. Support gender-responsive anticipatory action funding that reaches women and girls before crisis hits. Donors should finance the operational elements that turn a warning into action: locally appropriate, risk analysis that takes into account men's, women's, girls' and boys' unique needs; predefined trigger thresholds; flexible, pre-positioned finance; and measures like early cash, livestock support, water access, flood preparedness that address women and girls' heightened vulnerability specifically.

3. Protect livelihoods before households lose them. Donors should support agricultural livelihoods at risk in the El Nino shocks by funding seeds, fertilizer, and cash, with special attention to targeting women-headed farms and cooperatives before planting windows. Women farmers typically hold smaller, less secure plots than men which makes them disproportionately likely to scale back planting first when input costs rise. Funding should prioritize women farmers, women-headed households, and cooperatives wherever country-level analysis identifies them as facing particular barriers to land, inputs, income, or decision-making.

4. Fund the compound crisis people are actually facing. Research has found local and women-led organizations losing capacity at the same time that compounding shocks are increasing demand for the gender-based violence and protection services many of these same organizations provide — rising hunger and rising GBV risk move together, not separately. Since the combined pressures will determine hunger outcomes in each context, donors should finance responses with funding flexible enough to respond to overlapping threats rather than defining El Niño as a single-hazard emergency.

5. Back the organizations closest to the crisis. Donors should commit a rising, multi-year share of funding directly to local and women-led groups within the current 2026–27 cycle, with simplified compliance pathways, and fair coverage of core costs. Women-led and local organizations should participate in decisions on preparedness, financing, and response design from the start, not only after priorities are set.

6. Reduce reliance on a narrow donor base — with new money, not just new donors. Until recently, half of all food-sector humanitarian funding came from a single donor, and 90% from just 16.[xxi] Donors beyond the current small group — including other G7 and G20 governments — should announce new, incremental pledges at the next relevant ministerial and replenishment opportunities in 2026–27. Any new financing mechanism should build in a standing, minimum share of programming for women and girls from the start, rather than adding one after budgets are already

set. Regional institutions, development banks, climate-finance mechanisms, and philanthropic funders should also increase both the quantity and the quality of financing for food security and humanitarian action.

The Bottom Line

Today's crisis is not simply a climate emergency. It is a compound crisis with climate hazards layering on top of hunger, conflict, market disruptions, forced displacement, social and gender inequality, and shrinking humanitarian capacity.

As a crisis, it will not arrive as a single event, but as a cascade of climate hazards and interconnected crises across multiple regions at once. Unlike many crises, this one is predictable and we have known for a long time that it is coming. The human cost will be decided by a series of choices. In 2022, the world chose to act at scale once the shock was already underway, and that action mitigated the worst outcomes. In 2026, that same scale of reactive mobilization cannot be assumed, which is why the choice this time has to be made earlier: not just for a bigger response, but for an earlier, smarter one, backed by new and additional resources.

The tools that worked in 2022 still work now. What has changed is not their effectiveness, it is political choice. Governments have chosen to fund these tools less; they have not discovered that the tools no longer work. The recommendations in this brief do not require new research or a new response architecture. They require decisions, made now, to release available funding and commit new resources; finance anticipatory action; protect livelihoods; respond to the full, compound crisis people face; back local and women-led responders; and broaden the funding base before the shock takes hold.

The 2022 response, while imperfect, proved the model can work. The question in 2026 is whether the world is prepared to release financing and trigger responses before the worst happens — or whether, this time, the choice will be made for us by delay. If so, the consequences for millions of people are unthinkable.

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