

START READY ACTIVATION DROUGHT IN ZIMBABWE

Participant utilising agricultural inputs,
credit: Ufumeli, 2025

Start Ready has been transformative in anticipating crises and protecting communities ahead of their onset. The mechanism aims to provide pre-positioned, pooled funding to support national stakeholders to act earlier for predictable crises.

BACKGROUND

At the end of October 2024, the Start Ready Zimbabwe system triggered for drought, following the risk monitoring period that ran from October to December 2024 indicating sustained dry periods and extreme high temperatures. Activities were implemented from the 15th of November 2024 to the 15th of January 2025, across three districts, during the predicted dry conditions in targeted parts of the country.

Zimbabwe was one of eight countries included in the third Start Ready Risk Pool, which ran from May 2024 to April 2025. During this period, Start Ready activated in anticipation of one major crisis in Zimbabwe – a drought forecast to take place in the second half of the 2024/2025 agricultural season.

THE SITUATION IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe is a land-locked, lower-middle income, food-deficit country. Over the last decade, it has experienced several economic and environmental shocks that have contributed to high food insecurity and malnutrition. At least 49 percent of its population live in extreme poverty – many impacted by the effects of climate change, protracted economic instability and global stressors. Drought is the most significant climate-related risk. Its frequent occurrence has significant consequences on livelihoods and food security. About 70 percent of the population is dependent on rain-fed farming, while most farmers are smallholders with low productivity.

Zimbabwe is vulnerable to El Niño events, which have been associated with prolonged dry spells and increased temperatures in the region. These conditions can result in droughts, water scarcity, and crop failures, creating further challenges for agriculture, national food security, and public health.

This Start Ready activation was targeted in communities which had been heavily impacted by the previous El Niño-induced drought during the 2023-2024 season, and further anticipated extreme dry conditions. The intention of the Anticipatory Actions was to mitigate the potential impacts of dry conditions predicted to occur. For example, drought resistant seeds were replenished so that communities can restock and replant.

THE DISASTER RISK FINANCING (DRF) MODEL

The Start Ready DRF system in Zimbabwe uses the UN World Food Programme's Drought Scientific Trigger Model to track and forecast rainfall during the rainy season, to monitor the potential for the onset of drought crises. The model tracks different windows of the rainy season to forecast how the rains will impact growth and harvest of crops later in the year using a Standardised Precipitation Index (SPI) and Dry Spell Indicators. Activation occurs when indicators forecast a 60% or greater chance of drought for two consecutive months.

THE ACTIVATION

The Start Ready activation was implemented in selected communities to enhance complementarity, avoid duplication of activities and ultimately to maximise impact. In total, £800,000 was awarded to three Start Network implementing members; Christian Aid, Save the Children and World Vision, and their local partners; Lutheran Development Services (LDS), The Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP), and Aquaculture Zimbabwe.

The early anticipatory financing for this crisis was crucial in ensuring the most cost-effective support, as implementing agencies were able to enter partnerships and arrangements with suppliers before the cost went up with the onset of the dry conditions. By purchasing inputs and identifying suppliers ahead of the peak season, the programme avoided inflated market prices, resulting in notable financial efficiencies.



INTERVENTIONS TOOK PLACE
IN MASVINGO, GWANDA
AND MATOBO DISTRICTS

£800,000
DISBURSED

70,254
PEOPLE REACHED

TRIGGER
OCTOBER 2024

RISK
POOL 3

Zimhlope, the District Head-Department of Agricultural Technical Extension Services in Gwanda – expressed how happy she was that “the implementing partner Lutheran Development Services (LDS) came to those villages which did not receive inputs from other NGOs, and those that received little input from the government” to align the activities implemented with the priority actions, and with the National Development Strategy in Zimbabwe to leave “no one and no village behind”.

For example, taking advantage of favourable market rates for infrastructure components enabled the expansion of planned interventions – such as adding an additional piped water station – without increasing the overall budget. Crucially, the adoption of anticipatory actions significantly reduced the cost of delivering support, by mitigating the potential impacts and preventing at-risk communities sliding into humanitarian crisis situations.

“We lacked the funds to buy enough seeds for our entire farming land - Start Network supported us with seed and I received 2kg Sorghum and Cowpeas. It is promising a great harvest, about half a tonne. (500Kgs)” - Charity, Farmer Gwanda

The project was helpful because we also got tick spray and the situation got better, there was a decrease in cow deaths.” - Thuso, Farmer Gwanda



ANTICIPATORY ACTIONS

Member agencies implemented multi-sectoral activities to mitigate the adverse effects of drought before they fully impacted communities. WASH activities included tackling water insecurity by improving access through rehabilitating and solarising high-yield boreholes.

This not only enabled more consistent access to water points for both households and livestock, but it also reduced the time and distance to such water points.

Food security and livelihoods were bolstered through the distribution of drought-tolerant, and high nutrition value seed packs, provision of livestock survival feed, livestock treatment programmes, and agricultural training programmes for farmers and extension staff in climate-smart agriculture, water conservation and livestock management – all aimed at reducing drought and poverty-related losses to crops and livestock, thereby improving livelihoods.

Early warning and communication technologies were established and strengthened to provide real-time updates on weather through mass media such as local radio and SMS messaging in local languages.

A large emphasis was placed on community engagement and accountability, with the affected and at-risk populations involved at all stages of the project from design, to implementation, and review, through workshops and Post Distribution Monitoring. This not only improved the effectiveness of the response as affected communities were able to identify the most important areas and key needs, but it also strengthened local capacity building by involving those affected in the design of projects and ensuring they were centred in the project when it came to learning and equipping them with the knowledge and tools to continue with best practices.

Collectively, these interventions reached 14,699 households and 70,254 individuals, bolstering community resilience against the imminent drought.



Community fetching water from newly mechanised borehole, image © 2018 World Vision Zimbabwe

“we are excited!” - Joyce, the project participant exclaimed. “We are looking forward to enjoying a delicious munyemba (cowpeas leaves as vegetables) and vegetable proteins from the cowpeas you have given us, it is going to be a real treat for children!”

Fiona, a community member from the Gwanda district explains how because “The project installed three 10,000-litre water tanks and sixteen or more taps, water points where we now get water from... we no longer struggle to get water for our livestock or home use. We are able to do other things”.

Start Ready activation for drought in Zimbabwe demonstrates the effectiveness of anticipatory action in mitigating the potential impacts of climate-induced crises. The anticipatory efforts enhanced seasonal productivity by acting ahead of anticipated drought and mitigating its impacts for the second year in a row.

To find out more about this Start Ready activation in Zimbabwe [click here](#).



Training of project participants on external veterinary chemicals, image credit: World Vision

