START READY
START NETWORK

EVALUATION OF START READY ACTIVATION FOR
DROUGHT IN MADAGASCAR

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to bring early and predictable risk financing to a growing number of at-risk people, Start Network has developed and experimented with a wide range of tools and approaches. One of the key mechanisms we have developed is a disaster risk financing (DRF) approach through Start Ready, which aims to provide pre-positioned, pooled funding to support national stakeholders to act earlier for predictable crises. **On the 12th February 2024, the Start Ready Madagascar system triggered for drought** with a mid-season trigger at the end of growing season in July, **anticipating poor performance of agricultural harvest** based on current growing patterns.

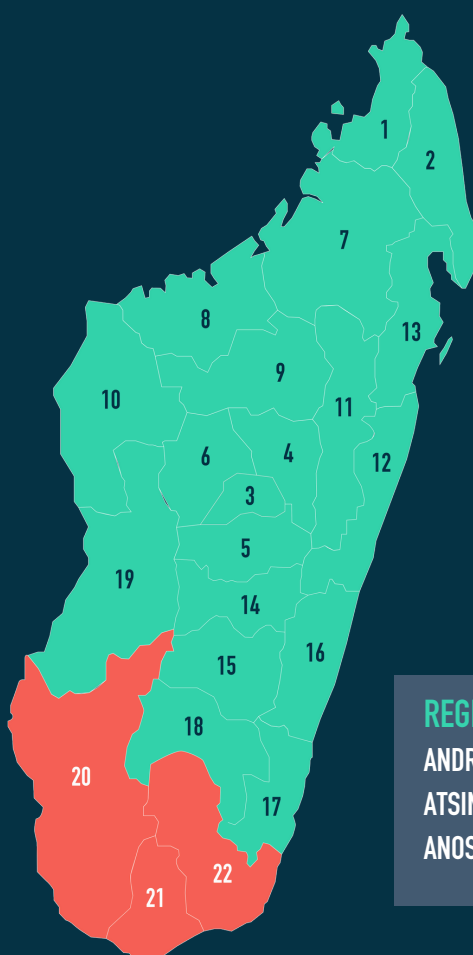Action Against Hunger, Response to Cyclone Batsirai and Emnati, Alert- 579

£1,800,000
DISBURSED

TRIGGER
FEB 2024

117,025
PEOPLE REACHED

REGIONS
ANDROY
ATSIMO ANDREFANA
ANOSY

The drought forecast model's threshold is based on the Water Requirement Satisfaction Index (WRSI), an indicator of crop performance during the growing season. The WRSI indicated an imminent severe drought, reaching the low threshold necessary to trigger the release of Start Ready funds for anticipatory action.

A total of **£1,800,000** was disbursed to five Start Network members; **Catholic Relief Services, Save the Children, Care International, Humanity and Inclusion, and Action Against Hunger.**

Member agencies implemented multi-sectoral activities with a focus on **early warning messaging**. **Educational initiatives** established safe spaces in schools with canteens. **WASH activities** included the provision of kits, water supply systems, and water trucking. **Food security and livelihoods** were bolstered through cash transfers, grants delivered for drought-resistant seeds and livestock, and agricultural training programmes were adapted for climate change. **Protection measures** raised awareness to prevent gender-based violence and promoted the inclusion of marginalised groups, ensuring comprehensive support for the affected population.

Collectively, these interventions reached **117,025 people**, bolstering community resilience against the impending drought.

2. EVALUATION QUESTIONS

- What have been the **results of the intervention** for those affected (particularly in terms of negative coping mechanisms and food insecurity, i.e. have they been reduced)?

- What have we learned about **what has worked well and what has not worked well in the DRF system** and in the implementation of the project? In particular, how timely and appropriate were the interventions?

- What was the **economic impact of the intervention** (i.e. savings made by the affected communities, protection of assets and livelihoods) and the cost-effectiveness of the project, compared with a humanitarian or emergency response intervention?

- What is the **value of Start Network's contribution** in this context? That is, to what extent is the DRF system, in particular the anticipation of drought, fit for purpose in relation to the response projects and in relation to other anticipatory action (AA) mechanisms in the affected areas?

3. METHODOLOGY

- **Document reviews** of Start Network reports, particularly on anticipation projects.

- **Data collection** in the field via interviews and focus groups in target and control areas.

Survey: 576 households interviewed in 30 villages in Ampanihy and Amboasary. Random selection of direct beneficiary households. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes.

Focus Groups: 10 target villages and 10 control villages (including villages that received assistance from organisation other than Start Ready and some groups that did not receive external assistance). Groups of up to 8 participants included Fokontany chiefs, heads of household, young people, etc.

- **Key Informant Interviews with stakeholders:** 25 Key Informant Interviews with representatives from partner NGOs, local authorities and humanitarian organisations. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone calls depending on availability.

Two districts (Ampanihy, Amboasary) were selected based on the representativity of activities implemented - triangulation of findings at the DRF level with the other districts through interviews.

4. RESULTS

4.1 RESULTS FOR PARTCIPANTS

The **flexibility and diversity of interventions** offered through this Start Ready activation proved to be one of its strongest attributes. By addressing various needs on the ground, the project ensured comprehensive support for the target communities. Interventions ranged from cash distributions to the provision of clean water and sanitation (WASH), seeds, and school kits. This adaptability enabled the project to tailor its response to the specific challenges faced by households in different regions.

The program also contributed significantly to **stabilising livelihoods during the post-lean period**, a time typically marked by food insecurity. Despite a modest harvest in 2024, **85%** of the target households were able to purchase essential staples such as maize, dried manioc, and rice. In contrast, control villages remained reliant on foraging for wild foods like the red cactus (Raketa), underscoring the critical role Start Ready financial support played in maintaining food security for the beneficiaries.

A notable outcome of the project was the **adoption of more resilient adaptation strategies** among beneficiaries. The provision of financial or in-kind assistance during a period of insufficient production allowed families to better manage their resources. For instance, in Ampanihy, several households used part of their aid to build food reserves, reflecting a shift toward long-term planning and resource management. Extreme coping mechanisms, such as reducing food rations or selling off family possessions, were largely avoided. The final survey showed that only 5% of beneficiaries resorted to these measures.

The project also **promoted food stockpiling and local investments**, with specific regional impacts. In Androimpano (Ampanihy), **70%** of beneficiaries used their aid to invest in livestock, fostering growth in livestock farming and enhancing local economic stability. Similarly, in Amboasary, 90% of beneficiaries focused on food crop investments, such as rice and cowpeas, bolstering local agricultural activities and food security.

Beneficiaries demonstrated a **diversified use of multipurpose cash transfer**, further showcasing the program's flexibility. Depending on the region, households allocated between 35% and 45% of the aid to purchasing food, while 30% to 40% was set aside to prepare for the next lean season. In Amboasary, 20% of the funds were used to repay debts, whereas in Ampanihy, less than 10% of the aid was directed toward debt repayment, with the majority of investments focused on sustainable solutions like livestock breeding.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

Despite its many successes, the project faced several challenges that highlighted areas for improvement. One significant issue was the **rise in local market prices** immediately following cash distributions. According to the interviews with beneficiaries, this inflationary effect reduced the immediate purchasing power of the cash transfer, forcing beneficiaries to delay their purchases or pay higher prices. Additionally, nearby villages that did not receive aid took advantage of these distributions by selling their products at inflated rates, further complicating access to food for beneficiaries.

Another area requiring attention is the **lack of understanding of selection criteria** among beneficiaries. Approximately 25% of recipients expressed confusion regarding the rationale behind the targeting process. This issue was exacerbated by the inclusion of criteria that prioritised not only the most vulnerable households but also farmers with land suitable for seed distributions. As a result, beneficiaries accustomed to emergency aid projects—typically focused on the most destitute—questioned why some households were included while others were not.

This confusion was compounded by a **lack of coordination with other humanitarian actors** operating in the region. In areas where emergency projects were simultaneously implemented, beneficiaries mentioned having struggles to differentiate between initiatives, further muddying their perception of the selection process. Better collaboration and communication between Start Network NGOs and other humanitarian intervention (WFP/FAO) would have ensured clearer messaging and alignment of objectives making it easier for communities understand the criteria and goals of the Start Ready project.

4.2 DRF SYSTEM RESULTS AND START READY ADDED VALUE

The **collaboration** between the different Start Network NGOs, national-level authorities, and local actors emerged as one of the significant strengths of the project. This partnership between NGOs and authorities fostered a coordinated response, leveraging the expertise and resources of each stakeholder to address the needs of communities effectively. Local partners, in particular, were instrumental in ensuring rapid and efficient implementation. Their established presence in the targeted areas allowed for quick mobilization and a nuanced understanding of the local context, which greatly enhanced the relevance and adaptability of interventions

Moreover, the **collaboration between international NGOs and local organisations** facilitated knowledge transfer and capacity-building. For example, partnerships like the one between CARE International and SAF FJKM demonstrated how combining international expertise with local insight can lead to more impactful and sustainable interventions.

The integration of the Water Requirements Satisfaction Index (WRSI) as a forecasting model was another success, as it ensured that interventions were data-driven and aligned with other actors working in Madagascar. This tool enabled the project to predict critical periods of vulnerability, allowing for anticipatory actions to be deployed in a timely and targeted manner. The alignment of Start Ready's strategies with existing national frameworks and policies amplified the impact, ensuring coherence with broader government efforts to combat food insecurity and build community resilience.The **multi-sectoral approach** enabled to address not only immediate food security needs but also supported agricultural recovery and resilience-building efforts. This holistic strategy ensured that communities received a range of support, from cash transfers to assistance with agricultural inputs, enabling them to meet their short-term needs while also investing in long-term solutions.

Finally, the **proactive communication and engagement** with communities, though not without challenges, were instrumental in building trust and fostering a sense of ownership among beneficiaries. This participatory approach encouraged community members to actively contribute to the success of the interventions, further enhancing their effectiveness

LIMITATIONS

Despite notable successes, several challenges hindered the effectiveness of the project. One significant limitation was the **lack of joint planning** among some members of the Start Network, which led to late adjustments in project areas. For example, certain partners were forced to redirect their focus from initially planned zones due to overlaps with other emergency aid programmes. This disruption affected the overall coherence and efficiency of the intervention and, in some cases, delayed the delivery of critical support.

The **timing** of certain interventions also presented a limitation. While the overall activation aligned with the critical lean season, the distribution of cassava stems before June 2024 was poorly synchronised with the planting season, which typically begins in October. Such misalignments reduced the effectiveness of agricultural support and highlighted the need for better alignment with local farming calendars.

Additionally, the **limited duration of Start Ready's support,** ranging from two to three months, was another drawback highlighted from the respondents. In contrast, some emergency programmes provided assistance for up to six months, which placed additional pressure on Start Ready partners to achieve significant results within a shorter timeframe. This mismatch in duration raised expectations among beneficiaries that were not always feasible to meet.

Finally, **logistical challenges and resource constraints** in certain areas affected the speed and effectiveness of the interventions. Some zones were difficult to access due to poor infrastructure, delaying the delivery of critical supplies and reducing the timeliness of the support provided.

4.3 WHEN SHOULD WE ANTICIPATE

The timing of Start Ready's activation aligned well with the critical lean season, which spanned February to March. This strategic launch ensured that support reached communities when they were most vulnerable and in need of intervention. Beneficiaries acknowledged the timeliness but emphasised the importance of tailoring interventions more closely to seasonal cycles.
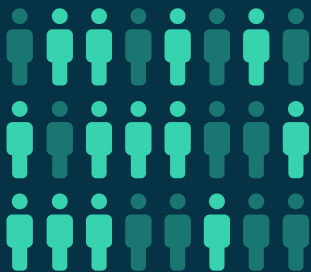
For instance, 80% of those surveyed suggested dividing interventions into two distinct streams: first, compensating for low agricultural yields during the harvest period; and second, supporting the subsequent agricultural season through activities such as seed distribution. This dual-focus approach would better address both immediate needs and long-term resilience.

RECOMMENDED CYCLE: ■ = PLANTATION   ▢ = HARVEST

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Maize and bean	■		▢	▢							■	■
Cassava	■						▢	▢	▢	■	■	■
Sweet potato		■	■				▢	▢	▢			

Anticipatory activities to anticipate bad harvest

Plantation support activity

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR START NETWORK

> To enhance the effectiveness of its interventions, Start Network should focus on **strengthening alignment and collaboration** with other humanitarian actors. This includes harmonising implementation periods and types of support with partners such as NGOs, UN institutions, and anticipatory action stakeholders. By doing so, Start Network can better meet the needs of beneficiaries and foster a more coordinated and efficient response. A **comprehensive mapping of stakeholders** is essential to clarify roles and identify potential synergies. This process would help determine which organisations can serve as implementing partners and which can provide complementary support to Start Network's initiatives.

> In terms of anticipatory action, **revising the intervention cycle in particular for the agriculture-related assistance,** could significantly improve outcomes. Planning actions using WRSI but also considering the situation at two levels would be beneficial: first, addressing low agricultural yields through timely support, and second, preparing for the planting period by distributing quality seeds and agricultural equipment. This dual approach would not only mitigate immediate risks but also contribute to improving agricultural productivity in the next season. For other sectors of intervention, the activities and schedule could be coordinated with this type of initiative, as agriculture remains the primary source of income for this targeted population

> Capitalising on experience is another critical area. **Organising exchanges between the anticipation and emergency response clusters** could facilitate the adaptation of approaches to local realities. Each community has unique social structures and needs, and these exchanges would ensure that interventions are appropriately tailored, fostering better outcomes for beneficiaries.

Humanity & Inclusion, Start Ready Response in Madagascar, 2024

FOR MEMBERS

For implementation partners, collaboration and community engagement are vital.

> **Ensuring strong inter-NGO collaboration** from project planning to sharing good practices can significantly enhance the overall impact of interventions. Furthermore, **working with local partners plays** a crucial role in bridging communication gaps. These partners, often members of the local community, can help correct misinterpretations and clarify project messages, ensuring that beneficiaries fully understand the objectives and benefits of the interventions.

> **Engaging beneficiaries and ensuring transparency** in the selection process is another important focus. Partners should organise regular meetings with beneficiaries to discuss progress, gather feedback, and make necessary adjustments. Improving the feedback system is critical; for example, response mechanisms such as suggestion boxes must ensure timely follow-up to maintain trust and engagement among beneficiaries. Communicating the selection criteria for beneficiaries in advance can also help prevent misunderstandings or conflicts. Once the list of beneficiaries is prepared, a validation meeting with all local stakeholders—such as regional, district, and commune authorities—should be organised. This inclusive process ensures accountability and fosters community trust in the project.

> **Awareness-raising activities** should include practical themes like household fund management. Teaching beneficiaries how to better manage resources, including project funds and food stocks, would help them prepare for future challenges and make more sustainable use of their resources.

> Finally, **tailoring interventions to the specific needs of each community** is essential for achieving long-term impact. Each commune has unique livelihoods and resources, and adapting actions to these local realities will ensure that the support provided is both effective and sustainable.