



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

**Mongolia**

# Impact of Early Warning Early Action

Protecting the livelihoods of herders from a *dzud* winter



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Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
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# From Early Warning to Early Action

Acting early transforms the way we manage disasters. Protecting livelihoods stops crises becoming humanitarian emergencies.

There is evidence that the intensity and frequency of climate-driven natural disasters and conflicts is increasing. Natural disasters now occur nearly five times as often compared to 40 years ago.

The impact on local economies, on lives and livelihoods, has similarly grown. In some of the worst-hit places, it can seem unrelenting. One crisis will follow another, every time stripping away at the limited assets of poor and vulnerable people, robbing them of their self-reliance and wounding their humanity and dignity.

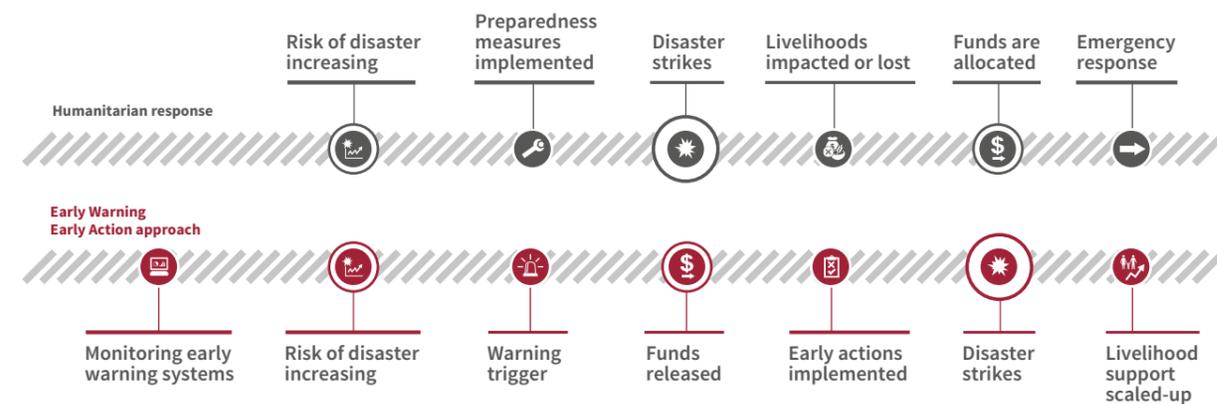
Globally, expanding needs, competing priorities and limited resources mean that new tools are essential to make interventions as wise and effective as possible, to ensure that the impacts of crises are limited before they can grow into even more costly humanitarian disasters.

Timely support also protects and empowers people the most, giving them the confidence to keep going or to resume their livelihoods. Investing in early action means FAO can help shelter longer-term development gains and increase resilience.

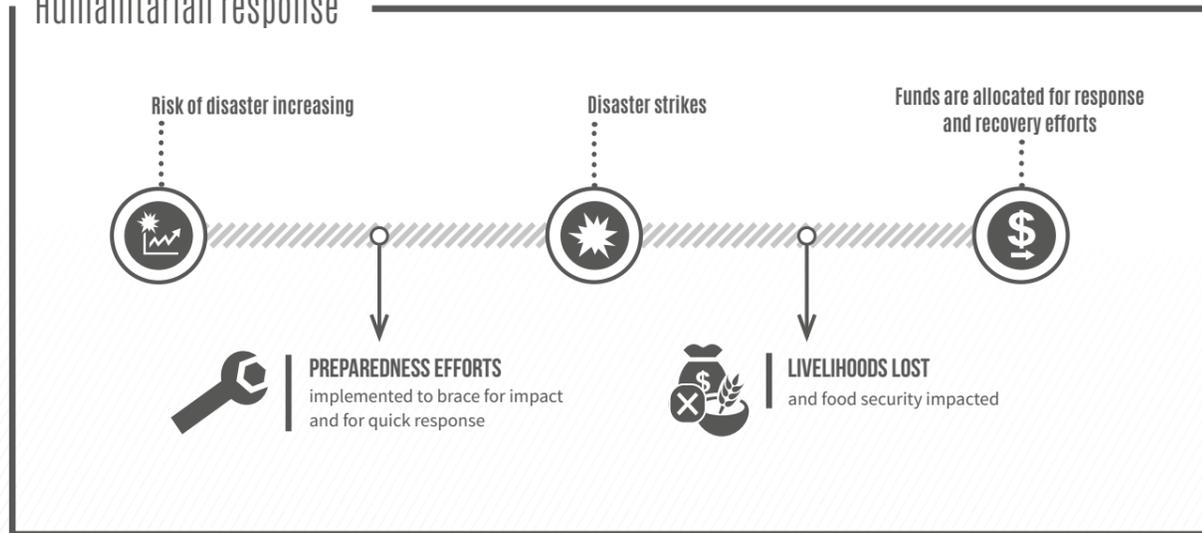
Working with national governments and humanitarian, development and scientific partners, FAO's Early Warning Early Action approach monitors risk information systems and translates warnings into anticipatory actions. Every quarter, FAO's *Early Warning Early Action report on food security and agriculture* ranks risks by their likelihood and potential impact and identifies the best interventions. Then, FAO's Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities (SFERA), can release money from its early action window. The funds back tailored plans which are rapidly put into place, drawing on FAO's greatest asset: its technical knowledge and expertise in supporting rural livelihoods.

Early actions are varied and flexible, ranging from cash transfers for fishing communities to safely store their nets ahead of an impending cyclone, to livestock treatments for herders as a drought intensifies, to flood defences before a severe rainy season to protect crops.

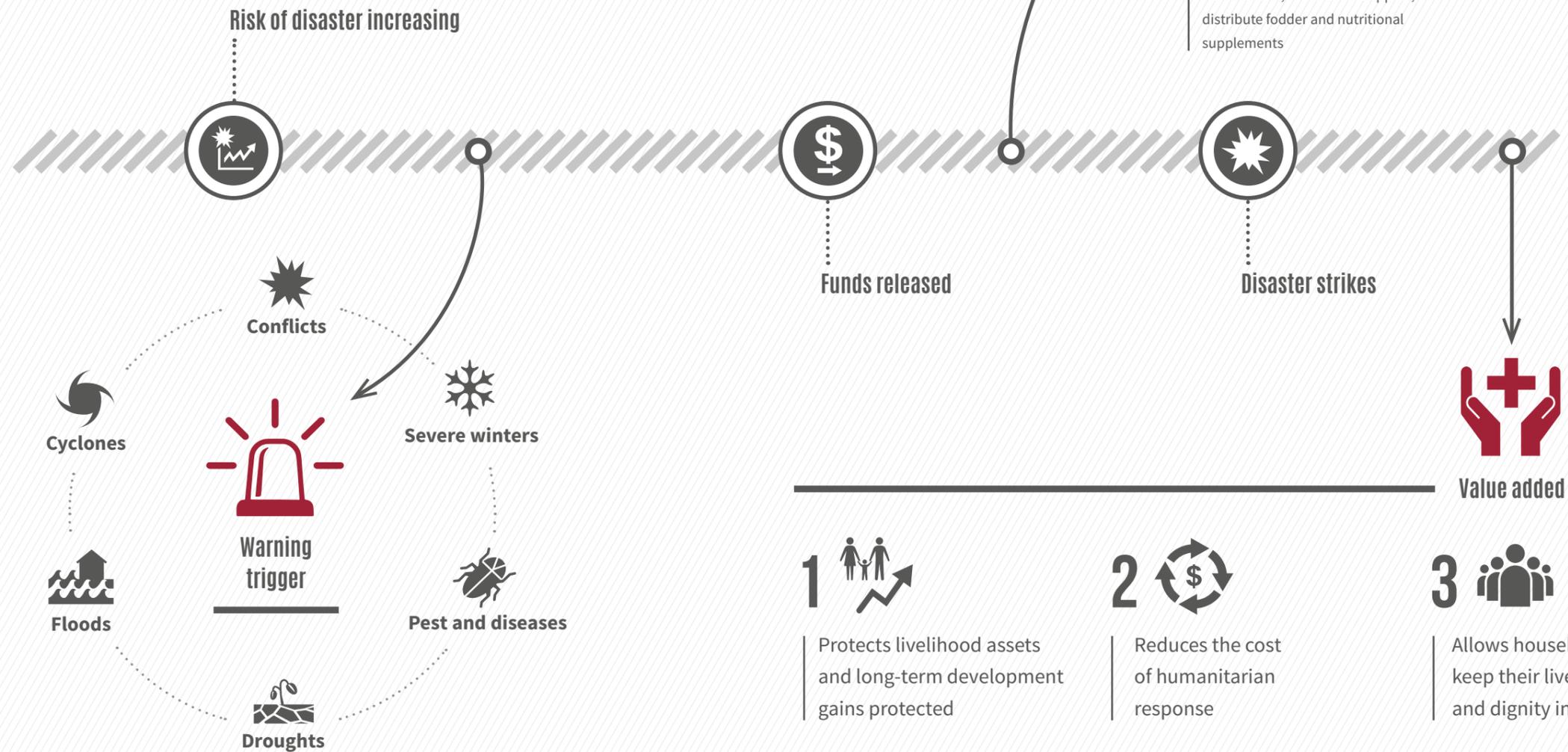
This study analyses the outcomes of targeted early actions in Mongolia during the winter of 2017 to 2018, triggered by warnings that extreme weather posed a major risk to vulnerable livestock herders. It evaluates their effectiveness and quantifies the benefits of acting early.



## Humanitarian response



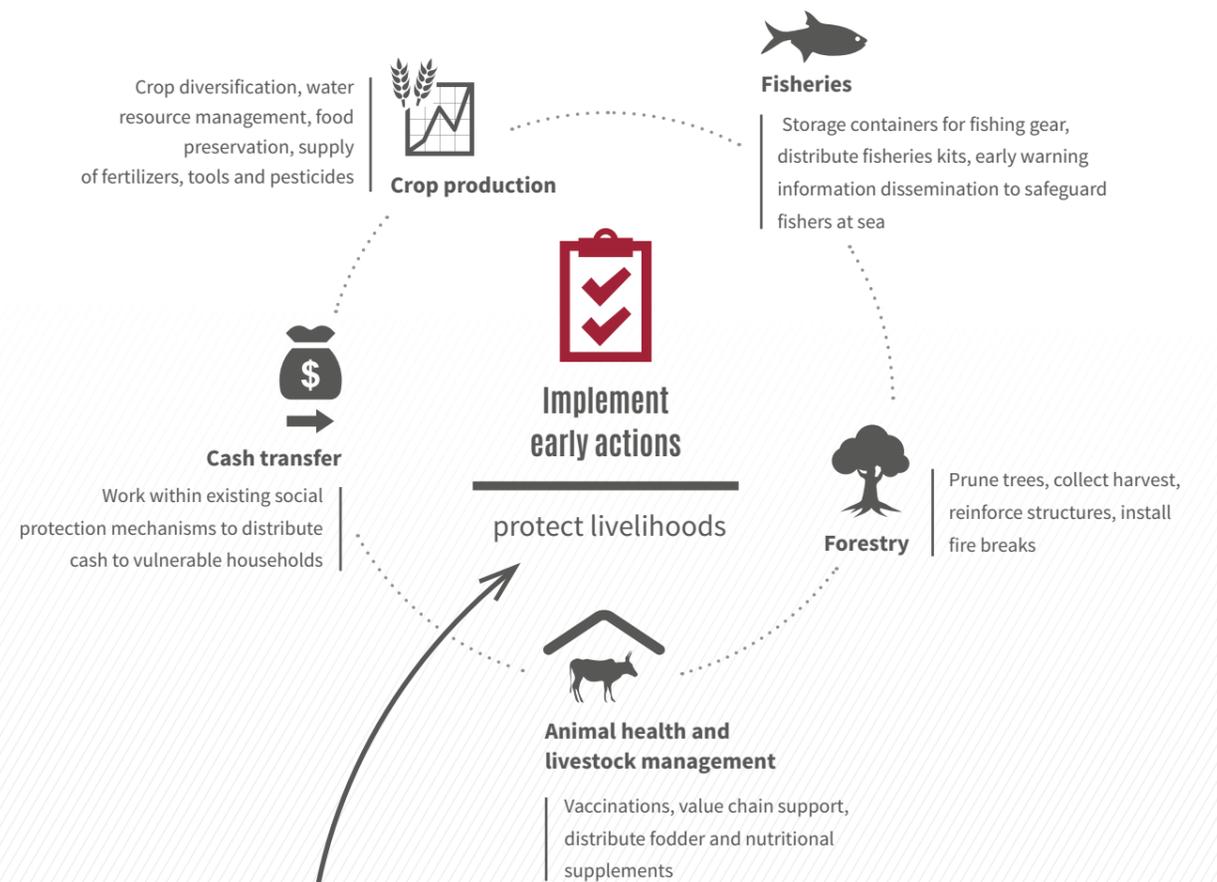
## Early Warning Early Action approach



**1** Protects livelihood assets and long-term development gains protected

**2** Reduces the cost of humanitarian response

**3** Allows households to keep their livelihoods and dignity intact





## The challenges facing Mongolian herders

Protecting lives and livelihoods means deeply understanding local complexities and challenges.

For centuries, Mongolians and their livestock have lived side by side on the vast steppe. It can appear open and empty, but more than 60 million animals rely on it for pasture – the greatest number ever recorded in the country. Raising livestock remains the most important livelihood in Mongolia and is the sole source of income for 35 percent of households.

The life of a livestock herder defies the challenges brought by Mongolia's climate – summers are very hot and dry and winters bitterly cold. But over the past two decades, climate change has made what is known as a *dzud* more severe and more frequent.

A *dzud* is a very harsh winter, during which the ground is so solidly frozen, under deep and firm snow, that animals cannot reach pasture. The pasture is usually already scant after a hot and dry summer, when the poor grazing has not allowed the animals to build up the stores of fat they need for winter. The poorest herders cannot afford extra fodder, of which there is little available anyway. They are threatened with descent into destitution in the space of just one season. In past *dzuds*, many herding households have lost all their livestock.

Economic changes have made things even tougher. In the transition to a free market system, the abolition of controlled herd sizes fuelled overgrazing. Exports declined and the meat processing industry all but collapsed. Many herders narrowed their income base to focus on raising goats for cashmere. But when prices fell, herders bought more animals to stabilize their incomes, leading in turn to more overgrazing.

On top of these complexities, rural to urban migration has created yet another challenge. When herders' livelihoods are devastated by the cumulative effects of the *dzuds*, and by the high-interest loans they take out to survive, many move to the cities. Already destitute, they live in shacks and yurts on the outskirts, devoid of working infrastructure, burdened by social problems and unable to break out of the vicious downward cycle of poverty.

In the last two years alone, the FAO Mongolia Country Office has implemented four emergency programmes in response to severe *dzuds* to try to mitigate the devastating impact on the poorest herders. FAO has brought deep understanding of the country to the interventions as well as experience of livestock programmes and hands-on skills in implementation. FAO's relationship with the Government of Mongolia – which goes back to 1973 – is thriving, with the shared aim of bringing practical support and hope to some of the most vulnerable Mongolians.



## Assessing the risks and generating the triggers

When the warning signs of an upcoming *dzud* and the devastating impact it would have on the poorest herding households were clear, FAO immediately triggered the release of money from its Early Action Fund. In December 2017, USD 290 000 was released for interventions to safeguard livelihoods by protecting livestock assets.

The trigger and the warnings came when FAO layered and analysed information from a focused collection of key monitoring sources.

The first was a Crop and Food Security Assessment carried out jointly with the United Nation's World Food Programme from June to October. It found 80 percent of Mongolia enduring very hot weather and drought. It raised an alarm: a lack of grazing means livestock cannot build the fat or muscle reserves they need to survive a harsh winter. Wheat production was down by 30 to 70 percent and the price of milk, which gives herders valuable income, was down by 20 to 30 percent. To make things worse, unusually heavy rains damaged much of the important September harvest, which is used to build up winter fodder reserves.

Carefully monitoring the information and bringing it all together is essential. It defines the risk and provides the trigger for early action.

The next warning came from a mapping of pasture carrying capacity, which showed more than 40 percent of pastureland was moderately to heavily overgrazed and 35 percent more was lightly – but still – overgrazed. Animal numbers have increased by almost a third in Mongolia since 2005 and at 22 animals for each person, there are nearly double the land can sustain.

The Government of Mongolia, sounded its alarm in November, sharing a *dzud* risk map, which showed half the country already under snow. It combined 15 indicators including snow cover days, weather patterns and agricultural vulnerability to show 30 percent of the country as being of high risk – and another 30 percent of medium risk – of a severe *dzud*.

FAO also turned to another information source, Columbia University's International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI), for more monitoring and analysis. The Institute forecast heavy snow and a likely localized *dzud* for January to March 2018. The alarm bells rang that 5 areas were under especially severe threat and FAO began to act. It planned interventions in the *soums* – or administrative districts – of Arkhangai, Bulgan, Zavkhan, Uvurkhangai and Tuv.



## When to intervene and how

Getting the timing right makes early action even more effective.

For its early interventions in Mongolia, FAO layered the monitoring and forecasting together with social and economic information to closely pinpoint the most vulnerable families. They had small herds, were often run by a single parent, had limited or no social welfare support and poor access to markets or crop-producing land. FAO purchased 340 tonnes of concentrated feed and 17 tonnes of nutritional supplement for distribution and early action funds were earmarked to pay for the controlled slaughter of animals, or destocking.

The destocking of herds was the priority, with households receiving money for the carcasses of a goat and a sheep in December 2017 to cover their immediate needs. Families told FAO interviewers that this helped them to buy extra food supplies at the best time – before prices spiked as the *dzud* began to bite. Meat prices had also already begun to drop because of oversupply as herders said they were worried and had started to sell their animals, rather than try to feed them through a bad winter.

Destocking had a second important impact. FAO distributed the livestock meat to vulnerable urban households living in poor areas on the edges of the capital, Ulaanbaatar. It saved the households a precious USD 32 over a period of over two months when finances were especially stretched. Families told FAO that they were able to divert the money they saved to buying essentials such as food, medicine and school supplies.

FAO's distribution of feed and nutritional supplements to rural herders swiftly followed at the start of 2018 – the lean season. Livestock body conditions suffered the most and mortality was at its highest, with female animals due to give birth in April being especially vulnerable. There was already concern about livestock health as previous *dzuds* – especially the one of 2015 to 2016 in which 1.2 million animals perished – have had a cumulative effect. They have left both pastures and herders poorer and less able to bounce back.

In smaller interventions, FAO acted to protect specific categories of vulnerable animals. Blankets for wrapping new-borns contributed to a significant drop in mortality, which saved each household an average of USD 57. And as animals are weaker after the winter, FAO stepped in to contain and prevent an outbreak of disease, distributing animal health equipment and portable corrals to enclose animals for preventative treatment.

# Mongolia Early Warning Early Action approach

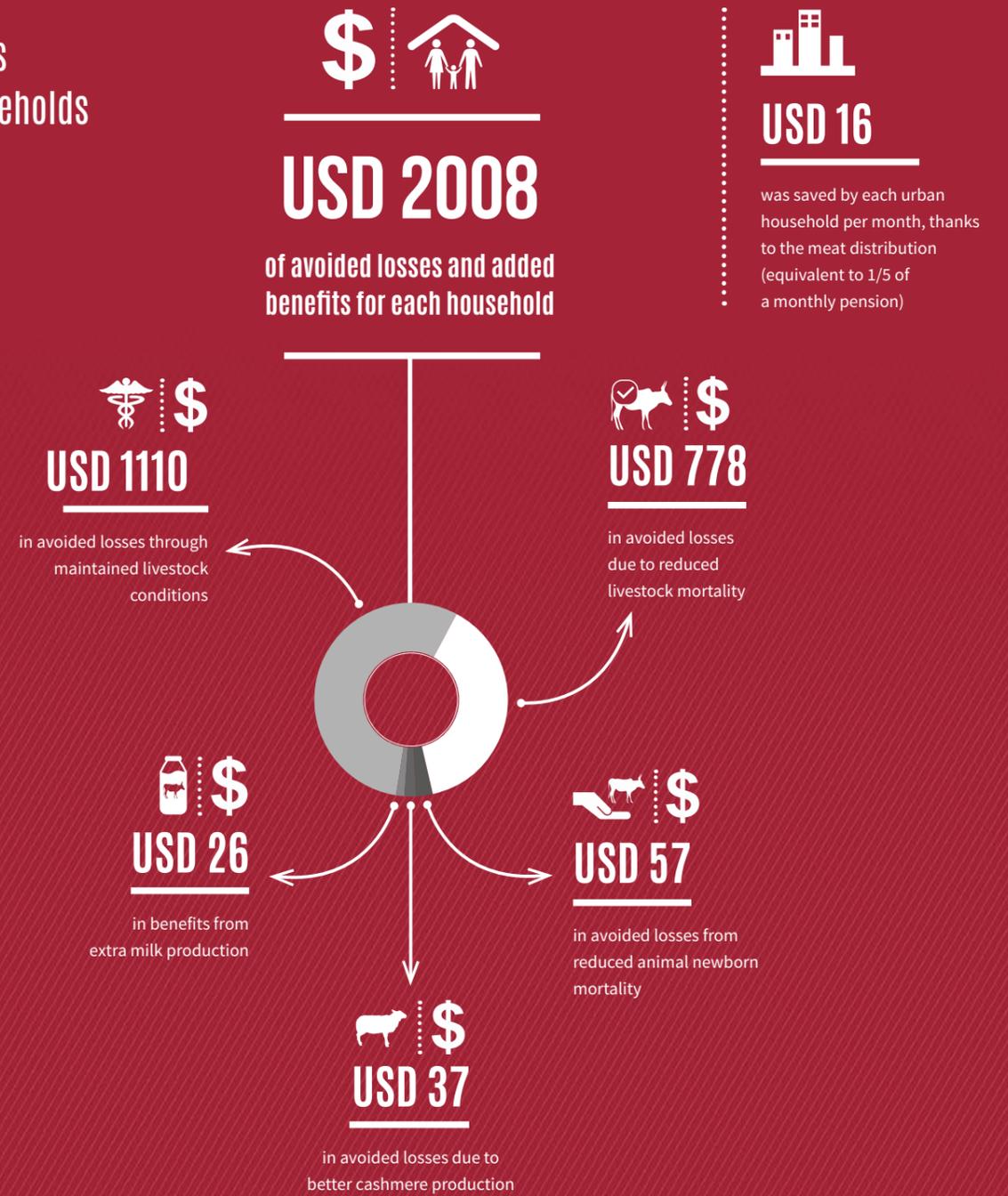
 What was the return on investment?

**USD 1 → USD 7.1**

for every USD 1 spent on feed interventions, the households had a return of USD 7.1 in avoided losses and added benefits

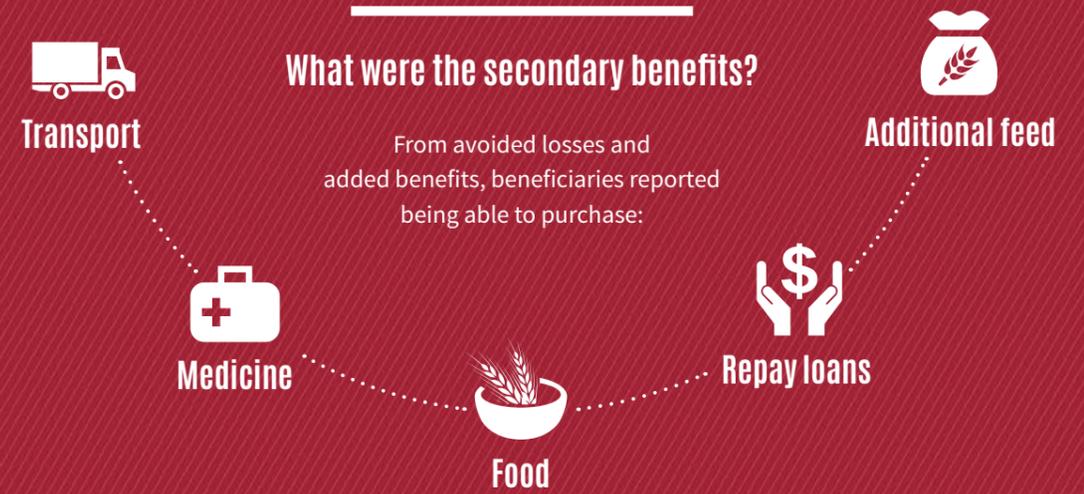


## Benefits to households



**USD 16**

was saved by each urban household per month, thanks to the meat distribution (equivalent to 1/5 of a monthly pension)





## FAO's return on its investment

It is increasingly proven that early livelihood interventions give the best value for money.

FAO wanted to check exactly how effective its early intervention was in Mongolia, building on the success and insight of a detailed analysis of actions taken in Kenya to mitigate a predicted severe drought.

In Mongolia, the analysis, which is known as a Return on Investment study, focused on two key FAO interventions – reducing herds in return for cash and distributing feed early when a localised *dzud* was forecast. The study measured the ratio between the direct benefits of the early actions and how much the actions cost to implement on the ground. In plain terms, it is the value for money of acting before an anticipated crisis has become a humanitarian disaster.

While FAO wanted to have and understand the quantitative information to guide its future work, it also wanted to know what the people thought about what it had done. So, in May 2018, FAO and representatives of local authorities went to interview rural herders who had taken part in early action, as well as some who had not.

The overall cost of the livestock interventions came to USD 285 for each household involved. In return, each one benefitted by USD 2 008, which gives a 7.1 benefit to cost ratio. This included the value of both adult and new-born animals saved, the potential loss of cashmere production, extra milk which was produced and the drop avoided in the value of livestock due to poor body condition.

When broken down, the figures show that by itself the value of animals saved at USD 778 was enough to buy almost 4 cows or 33 goats. Avoiding the decline in the value of herds was calculated at USD 1 110, or almost 4 times the cost of FAO's intervention in each participating household.

What proved to be key was the timing of FAO's action. The early distribution of feed from early February 2018 – ahead of the peak of the *dzud* – meant herders could maintain the condition of their animals and sell their goat cashmere in early spring, for higher prices. Cash from destocking herds in December 2017 meant they could buy additional hay and fodder before the impact of the *dzud* had forced prices to rocket.

The intervention played a key role in maintaining the dignity and self-confidence of the herders themselves. Keeping their livestock both alive and well is a source of pride and tradition in Mongolia. It is also a huge source of investment, as herders' animals both generate their future income and act as financial guarantees for health, education and other family needs. If their livelihoods can be preserved, people can build their resilience in the face of future crises.



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## Voices of Mongolian herders



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“With the help provided by FAO, I was able to save my weak animals. They are key to the money and the milk available for the three generations of our family – my mother, myself and my daughter.”

*Chimeddavaa Lodon*

It is been an investment for the future for the whole family, Chimeddavaa Lodon believes. The 46-year-old herder is positive and forward-looking, happy that her daughter will be able to graduate from high school because of the support of FAO’s Early Warning Early Action intervention in Mongolia.

She had clearly been worried as the harsh winter took hold and the 300 bales of hay she had bought with a loan against her mother’s pension had run out. So had the fodder for the family’s 55 sheep, 50 goats and 23 cows. Chimeddavaa moved with her 79-year-old mother Baasanjargal, her daughter and her livestock several times to find better pasture.

The 966 kilogrammes of concentrated feed and nutritional supplements such as fish oil and mineral blocks came from FAO’s programme at just the right time, as the core breeding animals were getting ready to give birth. The three generations of women did not lose a single animal from their herd.

“The feed package was high quality, so the pregnant and nursing animals regained their strength and had good milk for their newborns. We also benefitted, as we had milk and yoghurt earlier in the year than we had expected. This is particularly important for my mother, who is elderly,” Chimeddavaa says. She also took part in the destocking-for-cash programme, receiving USD 50 for giving up a sheep and a goat. “With the money, we were able to buy pain and high blood pressure medications for my mother, replenish the stocks for heating our home and pay the school fees for my daughter.”



“I would have had to have taken another loan just to get us all through the winter. I fear what would have happened if I didn’t get the help I needed.”

*Shaariibuu Luttumur*

After herding for 25 years, Shaariibuu Luttumur thought he knew how to prepare well for winter. The 62-year-old bought bales of hay and sacks of different cereals to make sure his animals could survive the winter and build up his reserves.

But the extreme weather hit Shaariibuu and his small herd of sheep and goats when the snow reached more than a metre high. “I thought I had prepared well, but then at the end of October, rain fell and after came snow,” he says. “It was so cold. The ground was totally frozen. It was unbearable for my animals.”

Shaariibuu is happy with the timely assistance he got from FAO in the form of 846 kilogrammes of concentrated feed. He also received a cash payment for selling a sheep and a goat as part of the destocking programme. The combined efforts allowed him to continue caring for his animals when his stocks ran out. As winter sets in, it is harder and costlier to get feed and for animals to find anything to eat under the snow.

More than anything he is relieved he did not have to add to his debts and have the traditional way of life he loves overwhelmed. “I rarely go into town as I like the opportunity to live in a healthy environment outdoors and I did not want to be any deeper in debt,” Shaariibuu says.



“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*

A loan from two years ago was still hanging over the heads of Anabish Jamsransuren and his wife. They have now managed to pay it off, as a result of FAO’s Early Warning Early Action programme. Herder households who kept goats for their cashmere like the Anabish family, were among those given feed and nutritional supplements before the worst of the extreme weather. 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. While they lost 3 of their goats because the onset of winter was so rapid and harsh, the others provided good cashmere. It is an important income earner in Mongolia and providing families with materials for clothes. 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. They were among the 26 percent of participants in the early interventions who reported no deterioration in the condition of their animals, as opposed to 71 percent of non-participants who reported a drop in their animals’ welfare.



## Looking at the impact of loans

Borrowing money in desperation can leave families “herding on behalf of the bank”. But properly-backed loans can also create confidence and opportunities.

More than one-third of herding households interviewed by FAO revealed that they had taken out new loans solely to get through the harsh winter. This indebtedness fuels the spiral of poverty for already poor and vulnerable herding households, as when they are unable to repay their borrowing, many herders migrate to informal settlements on the edges of cities, with none of the skills needed to find a job.

Some herders who have managed to hang on to their old ways of life spoke with bitter irony when they told FAO that they now herded on behalf of the bank.

It is the cumulative effect of recurrent *dzuds* which have trapped many herders in a relentless cycle of loans. Finance is relatively easy to obtain in Mongolia, using livestock as a guarantee. But, if poorer families with smaller herds lose a significant number of animals, they often borrow, so as to get their herds back up to the size which keeps their income stable. This means more loans, more overgrazing, more environmental damage and a bar to diversifying Mongolia’s narrow economic base.

Herders who benefitted from FAO’s Early Warning Early Action interventions explained that they had been able to repay 59 percent of their loans.

Anecdotally, herders say that the early interventions had also given them more confidence and helped them keep their dignity. Ganbaatar Sodnom-sh used the money he saved from receiving concentrated feed and nutrients and cash from FAO’s destocking programme to take a loan to buy a motorbike, rather than new livestock. “Because our animals survived the *dzud*, we could use them as a guarantee for a loan – but not in the old way, to rebuild the herd,” he says. “The motorbike is perfect for us in the countryside. I save a lot of time taking my children to school and getting into the town centre.”

Ganbaatar’s herds are stable and that part of his income – on which he supports 6 people – is currently secure. The freedom to travel means he can research small business opportunities in town more easily and look forward with confidence and optimism.



## FAO and the Mongolian Red Cross partnership

Collaboration and cooperation are especially important in emerging initiatives such as Early Warning Early Action, also known as Forecast-based Financing. New ideas can be sparked from conversations and critical knowledge and skills can be shared between partners at the crucial early stages, when a potential disaster is being identified and plans drawn up.

FAO and the Mongolian Red Cross began working closely together in October 2017, when they started investigating what information would give the best detailed picture of the likelihood, severity and impact of a *dzud*. Together, FAO and the Mongolian Red Cross used the same *dzud* risk map as the basis for planning their early interventions and worked off the same early warning information to establish their timings. They pooled their findings about risk and vulnerability to create the best information possible for programming.

The two agencies were also able to swap skills. FAO's technical knowledge on livestock management supported the design of the Mongolian Red Cross's actions, allowing interventions to be run in a seamless and complementary way. The Mongolian Red Cross's presence on the ground in the *soums* – or administrative districts – meant it could compliment FAO's interventions and therefore reach a larger number of households.

Working in close partnership is hugely beneficial to organizations and the people they serve.

Avoiding duplicated efforts also proved to be a significant benefit in planning and implementing early actions. Using the same *dzud* risk map allowed FAO Mongolia and the Mongolian Red Cross to split target areas efficiently, carefully mapping and focusing on the herder households that were most threatened.

Besides the practicalities, partnering is also an effective way of raising awareness of, and advocating for, the benefits of the Early Warning Early Action approach. It helps to inform other potential key partners and create a common approach within a country. Both FAO and the Mongolian Red Cross count it as a success that the Government of Mongolia is now interested in using the Early Warning Early Action approach in its contingency planning and funding.

The FAO and Mongolian Red Cross partnership has continued, even after the end of the intervention programme. FAO was able to share its expertise in the analysis of value for money on livestock interventions – the Return on Investment – which it gained from its previous work in the Horn of Africa. FAO had a framework ready to adapt to the Mongolian context, which in turn allowed the Mongolian Red Cross to align the information it gathered and scrutinised.



## Social and economic benefits of early action

Intervening early to stop crises escalating can have much wider benefits than just the initial targets.

On the hills cloaking the capital, Ulaanbaatar, more than 800 000 people – 60 percent of the population – live in informal settlements, or *gers*, which stretch over more than 100 square kilometers. In the winter, rusty brown smoke from them burning cheap coal and rubbish such as old tyres, combines with the bitter cold air. It makes the city the world's most polluted in winter, with average pollution levels of more than 20 times the internationally recommended limit. On some individual days, it is over 80 times the limit.

Many of the residents of the *gers* were once herders out on the steppe. Moving to urban areas was their last hope after losing their herds and their traditional livelihoods to one of the increasingly frequent *dzuds*. Often herders do not have the necessary skills to take on other work, if they can find it.

Mongolia faces this and other challenges: from changes to its climate, changes to the global and local economies and changes to its population structure. It is a complex situation and FAO is working with the Mongolian government to address longer term issues. While early actions are short term interventions which cannot answer all challenges, they can have wider benefits which can be built upon.

FAO went to the *gers* to listen to the views of people who had received meat from its destocking-for-cash action. They told FAO that the 19 tonnes of meat lasted them an average of 2 and a half months, saving them USD 32 each, or about one-fifth of the monthly pension many poor and vulnerable people live on. They bought winter fuel, clothes, school supplies and medicines and invested in small businesses with the money. Many spoke of how pleased they were being part of a programme helping herders against the *dzud*.

In the rural areas, FAO listened to similar stories about the benefit of additional food being available because of its early interventions. When it is very cold, cows produce little milk or even stop producing altogether – a severe loss to communities whose staples are milk and meat. But herders who took part in the interventions enjoyed an average of a litre of milk a day from each of their cows, as opposed to the 0.16 litre for those who did not take part. It is a nutritional lifeline.

FAO hopes that it can help poor and vulnerable people maintain their self-esteem, dignity and above all their humanity, as they build their resilience to the challenges they face.

Many of the inhabitants of informal urban settlements were once herders who lost their livelihoods. Early Action can protect herders against destitution and forced migration.



©FAO/C. Jones

Early distribution of feed helped livestock remain in good condition, allowing herders to harvest and sell more cashmere in the spring when prices were at their highest.



©FAO/P. Khangaikhuu

Families who benefited from the intervention had an average of an extra litre of milk a day. Milk is critical for children's nutrition.



©FAO/P. Khangaikhuu

FAO's all-female implementation team ensured the successful and timely delivery of Early Action activities. Their expertise and experience was invaluable.



©FAO/Mongolia

## Lessons learned

Acting early is not only possible – it is a responsibility. There is more and more solid evidence available to ring alarm bells and provide triggers. In Mongolia, FAO worked with its partners, combining monitoring systems to create a deeper picture of emerging threats and taking action at the optimum time to better mitigate them.

### The importance of identifying and bringing key information together

By mapping and layering information, FAO was able to target very precisely the most vulnerable herder households ahead of the *dzud*. While some herders have the financial ability to protect themselves, others have limited resources and the impact is devastating. FAO worked closely with the Government of Mongolia's Ministry of Social Development to develop criteria which would best target the most vulnerable at the right time.

Forecasts and other information about the weather and climate were also used in combination to develop good triggers and targeting. The *dzud* risk map produced by the Mongolian Meteorological Service was a driving force for risk information, which was rigorously shared. Early warning thresholds were established, and when these were reached, action on the ground was triggered.

The wisdom to make good decisions comes from careful consideration. FAO listens to the people it serves and learns from its actions.

### Working in partnership is crucial

FAO worked very closely with other national partners such as the Mongolian Red Cross and with international organizations. Its relationship with the Government of Mongolia was especially fruitful and both the government and FAO were able to learn from one another. Government officials helped FAO to conduct interviews about the return on FAO's investment, contributing a wealth of contextual information about how early actions had worked in communities. The enthusiastic support from the Mongolian government promises a longer-term impact from the early intervention project.

### Short term interventions can have longer term benefits too

This was FAO's first attempt at a destocking-for-cash programme in Mongolia and was a targeted short-term early intervention to protect the most vulnerable people. But its success shows that longer-term sustainable development benefits may result. The cash programme was particularly successful as it reduced herds at the best time – before the peak of the *dzud* – when animals were healthy and livestock prices were still good, which allowed herders to focus on the well-being and productivity of their remaining animals. For the poorest herders, these



animals are the key base from which to build recovery and resilience. However, a longer-term perspective must be taken into account. The sustainability of herder livelihoods depends on more efficient livestock management and a reduction in the environmental and economic impacts of over-grazing.

**Confidence for the future can be built up**

FAO's Early Warning Early Action programme helped herders become more confident of how they could approach the future, where recurrent *dzuds* and the impact of climate change appear unavoidable. Many herders revealed to FAO that they could now see that they may be able to avoid taking out additional new loans specifically to combat the harsh weather. This reduced indebtedness, combined with having kept their assets, may increase herders' confidence to diversify their livelihoods.

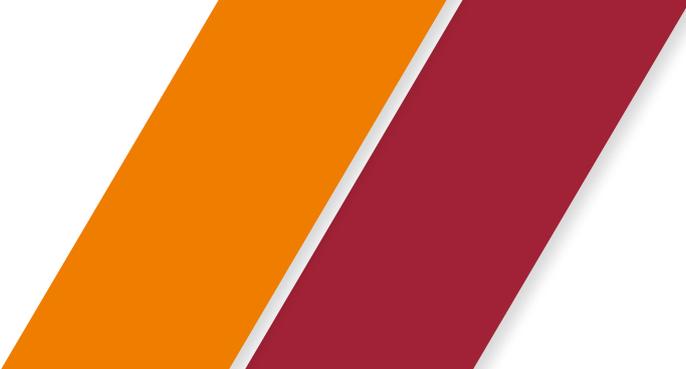


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Acting early saves lives and livelihoods,  
builds resilience to future shocks,  
and eases pressure on strained  
humanitarian resources.

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

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