

El Niño and the OND 2026 Rainfall Season

A Decision Window for Eastern Africa

What the strengthening El Niño signal means for governments, regional institutions and the private sector and what should be decided before the rains peak

September 2026

Executive Summary

El Niño has developed and, the risk signal for the 2026-2027 season is now unusually strong. In its 3rd September 2026 update, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) indicated a near-100% probability that El Niño would persist through December 2026-February 2027, with the event strengthening towards very strong intensity around its peak. ICPAC's regional outlook for the October-December (OND) 2026 season, issued on 18th August 2026, points to wetter-than-normal conditions across large parts of the Greater Horn of Africa, reinforced by an expected positive Indian Ocean Dipole. This is not, in itself, a forecast of disaster. It is a forecast of elevated probability, and the region's recent history, most notably the 2023/2024 OND season, shows how quickly that probability can convert into humanitarian, economic and health impact when preparedness lags the science. The central argument of this brief is straightforward: the forecast has already done its job. What happens next depends on decisions governments, regional bodies, humanitarian actors and businesses take in the coming weeks.¹²

Key Messages

- El Niño is now firmly established and, per WMO (3rd September 2026), has a near-100% probability of persisting through December 2026-February 2027, strengthening to very strong intensity around its peak. A positive Indian Ocean Dipole is reinforcing the signal.¹
- ICPAC's GHACOF74 outlook (18th August 2026) points to wetter-than-normal OND 2026 conditions across much of the Greater Horn, with a 90% chance of enhanced rainfall over southern Ethiopia, central-southern Somalia and north-eastern Kenya, and a high likelihood of seasonal totals above 400mm in parts of Somalia, central Kenya, the Lake Victoria Basin, Burundi and western Rwanda/Tanzania.²
- Much of the region enters this season from a drier-than-normal June to September 2026, which hardened soils and stressed livelihoods in South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea and parts of Kenya, the same drought-to-deluge sequence that preceded the destructive 2023/2024 floods.³
- The 2023/2024 OND event is the most relevant recent analogue: it killed at least 479 people, affected 5.2 million and displaced close to 2 million across Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan and Sudan, and damaged 293 health facilities. It illustrates consequence, not a prediction of scale for 2026.⁴⁵
- Roughly 88 million people across the region already sit in IPC Phase 3 or above; flooding, market disruption and disease risk from OND 2026 would compound, this existing caseload.⁶

¹World Meteorological Organization. (2026, September 3). El Niño/La Niña update (August 2026). <https://wmo.int/resources/publication-series/el-ninola-nina-updates/august-2026>

²IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre. (2026a, August 18). Technical statement from the 74th Greater Horn of Africa Climate Outlook Forum (GHACOF74). <https://www.icpac.net/publications/>

³IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre. (2026c, May 19). Technical statement from the 73rd Greater Horn of Africa Climate Outlook Forum (GHACOF73). <https://www.icpac.net/publications/>

- Anticipatory financing exists and is being used - IFRC DREF, WFP's Anticipatory Action Fund, FAO's SFERA and the Start Fund had already disbursed over US\$35 million, across East Africa, Central America, and the Sahel, for El Niño-related risk by mid-2026, but current pre-positioning remains well short of the scale the forecast now justifies.⁷
- The decisive variable is no longer the forecast itself but the speed and coordination of the response it triggers: releasing contingency financing, protecting known flood and landslide zones, and securing health, water and market systems before, not after, the rains peak

Priority Decisions For Senior Decision-Makers

1. Activate and, where triggers allow, release pre-arranged contingency and anticipatory-action financing now, ahead of October onset.
2. Direct disaster-management authorities to update flood, landslide and displacement contingency plans against the ICPAC 400mm-plus zones and known river basins.
3. Instruct health ministries to pre-position cholera, AWD and malaria supplies and secure continuity of facilities in flood-exposed counties/ woredas/districts.
4. Task national meteorological services and disaster authorities to agree explicit rainfall/river-level triggers linked to pre-approved response actions.
5. Instruct infrastructure and transport agencies to inspect and prioritise drainage, culverts and at-risk road/rail corridors on key trade routes.
6. Brief private-sector counterparts in agriculture, logistics, insurance and finance on the forecast so continuity plans can be activated in parallel with government action.

1. The regional Outlook

Sea-surface temperatures across the central-eastern equatorial Pacific have shown persistent and intensifying warm anomalies since mid-2026. WMO's El Niño/La Niña Update of 3 September 2026 confirms El Niño is firmly established and forecasts it will strengthen further, reaching very strong intensity before peaking towards the end of the year, with an exceptionally high likelihood, described by WMO as its most unequivocal ENSO statement to date, of persisting through September to November 2026 and

⁴United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2023). Eastern Africa: El Niño impact snapshot, November and December 2023. <https://www.unocha.org/>

⁵World Health Organization. (2024, February 20). Situation report: Greater Horn of Africa food insecurity and health-Grade 3 emergency, 1 November-31 December 2023. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/situation-report--greater-horn-of-africa-food-insecurity-and-health---grade-3-emergency---01-november---31-december-2023>

⁶Food Security and Nutrition Working Group. (2026, August). FSNWG special report on El Niño. IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre. <https://www.icpac.net/fsnwg/fsnwg-special-report-on-el-ni%C3%B1o/>

⁷Anticipation Hub. (2026, June 22). El Niño 2026-2027: Seizing the moment. <https://www.anticipation-hub.org/news/el-nino-2026-2027-seizing-the-moment>

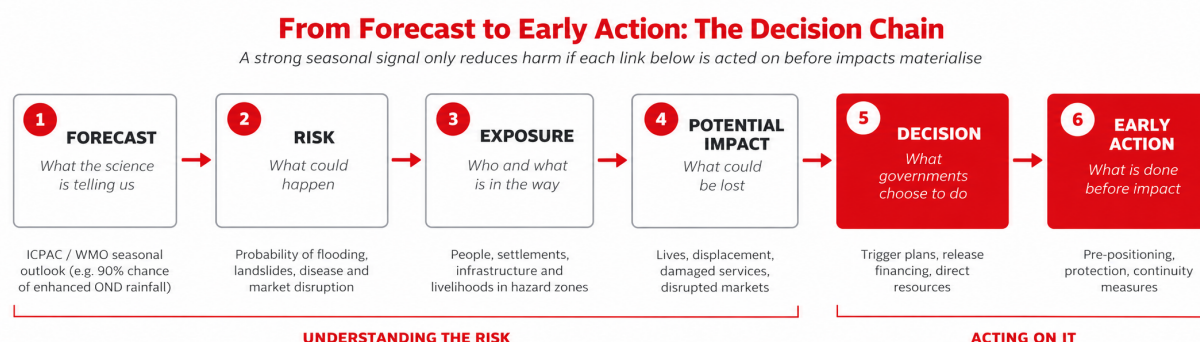
December 2026 to February 2027. A positive Indian Ocean Dipole is also expected, reinforcing rather than offsetting the Pacific signal, with a seasonal mean value of around 0.9°C projected for September to November.¹

For the Greater Horn of Africa, ICPAC's GHACOF74 outlook (18 August 2026, agreed jointly with National Meteorological and Hydrological Services) indicates a 90% chance of enhanced rainfall over southern Ethiopia, central-to-southern Somalia and north-eastern Kenya, and a high probability of seasonal totals exceeding 400mm in parts of central-to-southern Somalia, central Kenya, the Lake Victoria Basin, Burundi, and western Rwanda and Tanzania. Onset is expected to be early to normal across most of the eastern and southern sub-region, including Somalia, central and eastern Kenya, southern Ethiopia and most of Tanzania. Temperatures are also expected to run above average across most of the region, most markedly in eastern Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia - a combination that raises evaporation, disease-vector activity and heat stress on top of the rainfall signal.²

Two features of the current situation warrant particular attention. First, much of the region enters OND 2026 from a drier-than-normal June to September season: GHACOF73 indicated a high likelihood of below-normal rainfall across parts of South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and western and coastal Kenya, with probabilities exceeding 60-80%. This matters because the transition from a relatively dry period to potentially wetter-than-normal conditions can create a rapid shift in risk. Hardened, moisture-depleted soils absorb rainfall poorly and generate faster runoff, which is part of why the 2023/24 season, which followed a comparable dry spell, produced flash flooding even in areas not accustomed to it. Second, ICPAC has identified 1997 and 2023 as the closest analogue years for the current El Niño South Oscillation (ENSO)/ Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) configuration. Both produced markedly wetter-than-normal OND seasons across much of the region; neither should be read as a prediction that 2026 will replicate their scale or geography. The forecast itself remains the primary planning reference.³¹

2. From Forecast to Risk

A strong seasonal signal does not translate automatically into disaster. Whether OND 2026 becomes a manageable wet season or a crisis depends on where the heaviest rain falls, its intensity and duration, the condition of soils and rivers ahead of it, and, critically, the exposure and vulnerability of the people, assets and systems in its path. The useful way to think about this is as a chain:



Each link can be strengthened or weakened by policy choices made now.²⁵

Impacts also compound rather than arrive in isolation. Heavy rainfall can drive flooding, which displaces people into crowded temporary sites, which raises the risk of water-borne and vector-borne disease outbreaks, which in turn strains health systems already stretched by other demands. Separately, flooding can cut roads and bridges, isolating markets, pushing up local food prices and deepening the livelihood losses of communities that may simultaneously be facing crop or livestock damage. These cascading pathways are why El Niño preparedness cannot be treated as a single-sector, single-hazard problem. The highest-value interventions are often the ones that interrupt a chain early, before it compounds.⁵

The region's food-security baseline is a critical piece of context. The latest Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG) assessment - estimated that approximately 88 million people across the countries it monitors were already highly food insecure (IPC Phase 3 or above) - a caseload built up over successive poor seasons and persistent conflict and economic stress. OND 2026 flooding would not create a new crisis from nothing; it would land on top of an already-stretched system, in some of the same communities.⁶

3. Where Risk Concentrates

The forecast does not imply uniform risk across Eastern Africa. Instead, ICPAC's downscaled outlook and known exposure patterns point to specific geographic systems warranting closest attention through OND 2026.²

- River basins and floodplains, particularly the Juba and Shabelle basins in Somalia, the Tana basin in Kenya, and the wider Lake Victoria basin shared by Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, where the >400mm probability zone is concentrated.²
- Urban centres and informal settlements with limited drainage capacity, where even moderate rainfall can produce flash flooding and disease risk disproportionate to the rainfall total.
- Landslide-prone highlands and escarpments in parts of Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi, where saturated slopes following a dry antecedent season can fail with limited warning.
- Areas transitioning rapidly from drought to deluge - much of the drought-affected pastoral belt spanning Somalia, southern Ethiopia and northern & eastern Kenya - where weakened coping capacity meets a sharp reversal in conditions.
- Transport and trade corridors, including the Northern and Central Corridors and routes linking the Port of Mombasa to the interior, which were disrupted during the 2023/2024 floods.⁴
- Sites hosting displaced populations and refugees, including camps in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia, where the 2023/2024 season demonstrated acute vulnerability to inundation and service disruption.⁴⁵

Where possible, national and county/sub national-level authorities should overlay these systems with ICPAC's downscaled maps and their own historical flood and landslide records to identify priority sites for pre-positioning and monitoring.²

4. Why Preparedness Must Move Ahead of Impact

The policy problem this season poses is not simply 'heavy rainfall is coming. It is the persistent gap between the quality of the early-warning information now available and the speed, scale and institutional readiness with which decision-makers act on it. That gap is well documented across the region. The forecasts exist, but funding is frequently released only after a disaster is declared rather than in advance of forecast thresholds. Institutional triggers for early action are often informal or absent and coordination across national and sub-national levels, and across borders on shared river systems, is inconsistent.⁷

The 2023/2024 season is the clearest recent illustration of the cost of this gap. Between September and mid-December 2023, OCHA recorded at least 479 deaths and 5.2 million people affected by El Niño-driven flooding, with close to 2 million displaced across Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia - Somalia (2.5 million affected), Ethiopia (1.5 million) and Kenya (546,000) among the hardest hit. WHO reported 293 health facilities damaged across Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, disrupting essential services precisely when demand for them - driven by rising cholera, acute watery diarrhoea, malaria and dengue caseloads - was increasing. None of this was unforeseeable. The 2023 forecast, like the 2026 one, was issued months in advance.⁴⁵

The financing evidence points the same way. The Anticipation Hub reports that by mid-2026 partners had disbursed more than US\$35 million in anticipatory action for El Niño-related hazards across East Africa, Central America and the Sahel combined, reaching close to 2 million people - a meaningful start, but modest relative to the scale of exposure implied by the current forecast. Established instruments already exist to close this gap. IFRC's DREF Anticipatory Pillar (Early Action Protocols of up to CHF500,000 and Simplified EAPs of up to CHF200,000, both triggered automatically once pre-agreed thresholds are met), WFP's Anticipatory Action Fund, FAO's Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities (SFERA), and the Start Fund. Analysis for the region also finds that El Niño-related shocks can reduce GDP in vulnerable economies by up to 1.7% points and add to public debt - a fiscal argument for early release of contingency financing, not only a humanitarian one. The instruments exist. The constraint is the speed and consistency with which they are triggered.⁷

5. Priority Actions for Governments and Regional Institutions

The following priorities are organised around the decisions they require, not around sectors alone. Each specifies who should act, what they should do, when, and, where the evidence supports it, what should trigger the action.

1. Convert forecasts into decisions. National governments, met services, disaster authorities. Before onset, Agree and publish explicit rainfall/river/soil-moisture triggers tied to pre-approved actions.
2. Release preparedness financing early. Finance/treasury, disaster authorities, donors are advised to disburse contingency funds and DREF/AA-fund allocations ahead of, not after, flooding.
3. Protect people and infrastructure in known risk zones. County and sub-national governments, public works, transport. Are advised to clear drainage, inspect bridges, pre-identify evacuation routes in mapped flood and landslide zones.
4. Health ministries, WHO, national Red Cross societies are encouraged to pre-position AWD, cholera, malaria supplies.
5. Agriculture and livestock ministries, FAO, WFP are advised to move livestock from floodplains and support post-harvest storage and monitor cross-border trade and prices to protect food systems, livelihoods and markets.
6. City authorities, DRM committees are encouraged to Clear urban drains and waste blockages and review construction and settlement in flood-prone informal areas.
7. Harmonization of river-basin monitoring and early warning across Juba-Shabelle, Lake Victoria and other shared systems, led by ICPAC, in coordination with national meteorological and disaster management authorities and relevant UN agencies.
8. Reviewing of business-continuity plans, alternative routes and insurance and risk-transfer positions against the forecast by the private sector (logistics, agribusiness, bank insurers et al).
9. National governments and meteorological services to lead the issuance of clear, consistent public advisories in coordination with media partners, to strengthen risk communication and accountability.
10. Disaster authorities, regional bodies, and donors are encouraged to conduct a rapid, honest after-action review to inform 2027 planning and financing.

6. Private-Sector Preparedness

The private sector has direct, material exposure to OND 2026 and this is a business-continuity and systemic-risk issue, not a matter of corporate social responsibility. Transport and logistics firms face route disruption on corridors already affected in 2023/2024. Agribusiness and food-supply chains face both opportunity, improved pasture and water availability where rainfall is moderate, and risk, crop and livestock loss where it is excessive. Banks, insurers and telecommunications providers face asset and

continuity exposure in flood-prone urban and coastal areas, and construction and retail sectors face both direct damage and demand disruption. Businesses operating in or supplying the region should review business-continuity plans against the ICPAC outlook, assess supply-chain dependencies on exposed corridors and identify alternatives, revisit insurance and risk-transfer arrangements, and incorporate official seasonal forecasts - rather than historical averages alone - into operational planning for the last quarter of 2026.²⁷

7. The Decision Window; What Can Still be Done Before the Rains Peak?

Before Onset:

- Release and activate pre-arranged contingency financing
- Pre-position health, WASH and Non Food Items (NFI) stocks in known flood corridors
- Issue joint government-met service public advisory on OND outlook

At Onset

- Trigger EAP on agreed rainfall and river thresholds
- Move at-risk livestock and household assets ahead of onset
- Activate cross-border basin coordination (e.g. Juba-Shabelle, Lake Victoria)

At Peak Impact

- Maintain health-facility and water-system continuity
- Keep drainage, roads and evacuation routes open and monitored
- Sustain risk communication. Monitor disease and market signals

Recovery

- Conduct After-event review of what triggered, what worked
- Repair critical infrastructure to higher resilience standard
- Feed lessons into 2027 contingency planning and financing design

Conclusion

The question this season poses to Eastern Africa's institutions is no longer whether an early-warning signal exists. WMO and ICPAC have provided one, well ahead of the season it concerns. The remaining question is whether governments, regional bodies, humanitarian actors, financing institutions and private-sector counterparts will act on that signal quickly enough to convert it into reduced loss of life, disrupted livelihoods and damaged infrastructure , or whether, as in 2023/2024, the region will again find itself responding to a crisis that the forecast had already described in advance. The decision space is open now. It will not remain open once the rains arrive.¹²⁴

ICHA International Center for
Humanitarian Affairs
At the Kenya Red Cross Society

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Contact us:

info@icha.net

TEL: 0703 037 050 | 0703 037 051

Office Location

**Red Cross Road, Off Popo road, South C, Nairobi,
Kenya**