

A CASE FOR SUPPORT



LISTENING TO COMMUNITIES IS KEY TO PREPARING FOR THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF EL NIÑO IN ZAMBIA

Extreme weather deepens public health emergencies, but interagency community listening tools can help officials and responders prepare for impending crises.

After a four-year hiatus, El Niño—the climate pattern that increases sea surface temperatures in the Pacific and influences weather around the globe—is back. The meteorological phenomenon threatens to bring drought conditions to Southern Africa, a region already battling multiple public health emergencies.

While compounding crises can feel overwhelming, experts are joining forces to prepare both the emergency response infrastructure and communities for the impending drought's effects. Local leaders, public health officials, and humanitarian responders are working together across the region in an act of hope.

In Zambia—where drought threatens to intensify the existing anthrax and cholera outbreaks—the Collective Service is collaborating with the Ministry of Health to harness the power of community feedback. Thanks

to support from The Rockefeller Foundation, the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) pillar has been reactivated, enabling partners to pool resources and data for an informed response. RCCE teams collect questions, concerns, suggestions, and beliefs about public health emergencies from the communities affected and feed them into shared decision-making tools. The community feedback, in turn, influences interventions and messaging that can keep people safe and healthy.

This cooperative effort, being carried out on behalf of Zambia's Ministry of Health and its National Public Health Institute (ZNPHI), builds upon existing community feedback systems and platforms. The Collective Service's partners for this preparedness work include FAO's Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases (ECTAD), the Zambia Red Cross, Africa CDC, USAID's Breakthrough Action partnership, and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife.

HOW DOES DROUGHT DEEPEN ANTHRAX AND CHOLERA OUTBREAKS?

The El Niño pattern causes heavy rain in some parts of the world, but in Zambia it is expected to bring hot and dry weather, shepherding in drought that could be devastating for families. In a country where nearly 70 percent of the labor force works in agriculture, El Niño's knock-on effects will seep into everyday life for some. Here's how:

Drought means below-average harvests and livestock production, which drive higher food prices, fewer labor opportunities, and malnutrition. Together, these factors may push people to adopt negative coping strategies such as eating types of meat they would normally avoid, reusing water past a healthy point, or traveling to congested urban centres in search of employment. Poor nutrition weakens people's immune systems, so those affected by insufficient diets are more likely to get sick.

As water becomes scarce, **cholera**—which is spread through food and water containing the cholera bacterium—becomes prevalent. This is because people are forced to prioritize hydration over sanitation. For example, community members may need to collect water from unprotected sources, such as rivers that have been contaminated or from increasingly crowded sources, which have a higher chance of contamination.

And there is less water available to ensure hygienic conditions for food preparation. Cholera, which thrives in these unsanitary conditions, has affected more than 900 people in the country so far this year, according to the WHO¹.

Droughts also increase the risk of **anthrax**, a zoonotic disease spread to humans through infected animals or animal products such as meat, wool, hair or hides. While the bacteria that causes anthrax is naturally occurring in soil, animals are more likely to consume it during droughts because—lacking verdant places to feed—they forage closer to the ground. More than 330 people² in Zambia have been infected by anthrax this year alone, some of whom have lost their lives.

Valiant public health efforts are underway to combat both of these diseases, but impending drought compels health and humanitarian responders, like the Collective Service and its partners, to up their game. Taking a One Health approach—a strategy that addresses the intersection between people, plants, animals, and the shared environment—is the key to preparing communities for the possibility of deepened health emergencies in the weeks and months to come.

1. WHO, [Multi-country outbreak of cholera, External Situation Report #8](#), published 2 November 2023.
2. Zambia Ministry of Health, [Press statement on Anthrax](#), 1 November 2023.

Community members share health information and concerns with Zambia Red Cross volunteers.
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ADVOCATING FOR STRONGER INVESTMENTS IN RCCE AT THE CONFERENCE ON PUBLIC HEALTH IN AFRICA (CPHIA)

RCCE and social behavior change (SBC) experts joined forces to spur learning, advocacy, and connections at the Conference on Public Health in Africa (CPHIA), which took place 27-30 November in Lusaka, Zambia. More than 100 participants and speakers gathered at a side event called *Preparing Communities for the Next Pandemic*. Hosted by Africa CDC, the discussion “served as an advocacy platform to strengthen RCCE efforts, scale up lessons learned, and share best practices in Africa.” The event aimed to progress the New Public Health Order agenda by arguing for additional investments in a skilled workforce in the RCCE and SBC sectors, which inspire community ownership of interventions during public health emergencies.

The Collective Service offered insights on the role of communities in the nexus between traditional knowledge and modern scientific approaches during public health emergencies; shared best practices about interagency community feedback mechanisms; and answered questions from policymakers, RCCE and SBC practitioners, and the media.



Ngonidzashé Macdonald Nyambawaro, Collective Service Surge Coordinator, presented at the International Conference on Public Health in Africa, 27 November 2023, on a high-level panel entitled *Strengthening the Continental RCCE and SBC Architecture: Preparing Communities for the Next Pandemic*.

THE POWER OF INTERAGENCY COMMUNITY FEEDBACK EFFORTS

When public health practitioners have access to the questions, concerns, recommendations, beliefs, and observations of community members, they can tailor activities and communication strategies to respond to local perspectives and needs. Acting upon community members’ perceptions is what saves lives in public health emergencies. This approach helps leaders and responders to move beyond one-way communication by deeply engaging communities and creating a feedback loop that alleviates the adverse effects of crises, combats misinformation, and gives a sense of ownership and voice to the people affected.

In Zambia, emergency responders have already been gathering community feedback regarding anthrax and cholera; however, each agency collecting data has been doing so autonomously. As the country prepares for the effects of El Niño, the Ministry of Health requested that the Collective Service develop and implement an interagency solution to gathering and sharing community feedback that would enable partners to access all the data to inform their activities in communities.

In response, the Collective Service’s surge personnel are working with partners and the Zambia Ministry of Health to **map community engagement activities** across the country to understand the gaps that exist and where there may be a duplication of efforts. One of the major gaps is the coordinated and systematic collection, synthesis, analysis and sharing of community feedback data by partners.

Through a series of engagement activities, the team has **obtained consensus from partners for a collaborative approach** to community feedback—and is now building a mechanism and tools to bring this collaborative work to life. Recognising that data is only useful when every agency is working from the same playbook, team members **created standardisation tools for coding all community feedback** collected from partners and are training response partners in the communities on the new system.

Thanks to automated processes for uploading data, the new way of working is already saving time and capacity for overstretched teams.

The team has **designed an interactive dashboard** to display incoming community feedback data, using Power Bi technology. The dashboard allows for real-time access to community members’ perceptions and enables anyone to analyse the information in a way that’s useful to their area of expertise. For example, one can easily gain insight into rumours about anthrax via the dashboard. Once a trend emerges—say, the belief that if meat goes through a traditional cleansing process, it is safe to eat—responders can combat this misinformation in real time through proactive one-on-one and public health messaging.

The interagency mechanism is a powerful tool for decision-making and it can offer a comprehensive picture of community perspectives and needs.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The effects of El Niño have not yet peaked, so while efforts are well underway, there's still more to do. The interactive dashboard will soon be rolled out and accessible to anyone, at any time, day or night. Responders will use the community feedback data to design, carry out, and pivot their activities. Leaders from Zambia's Ministry of Health can utilise the information for national- and local-level decision-making.



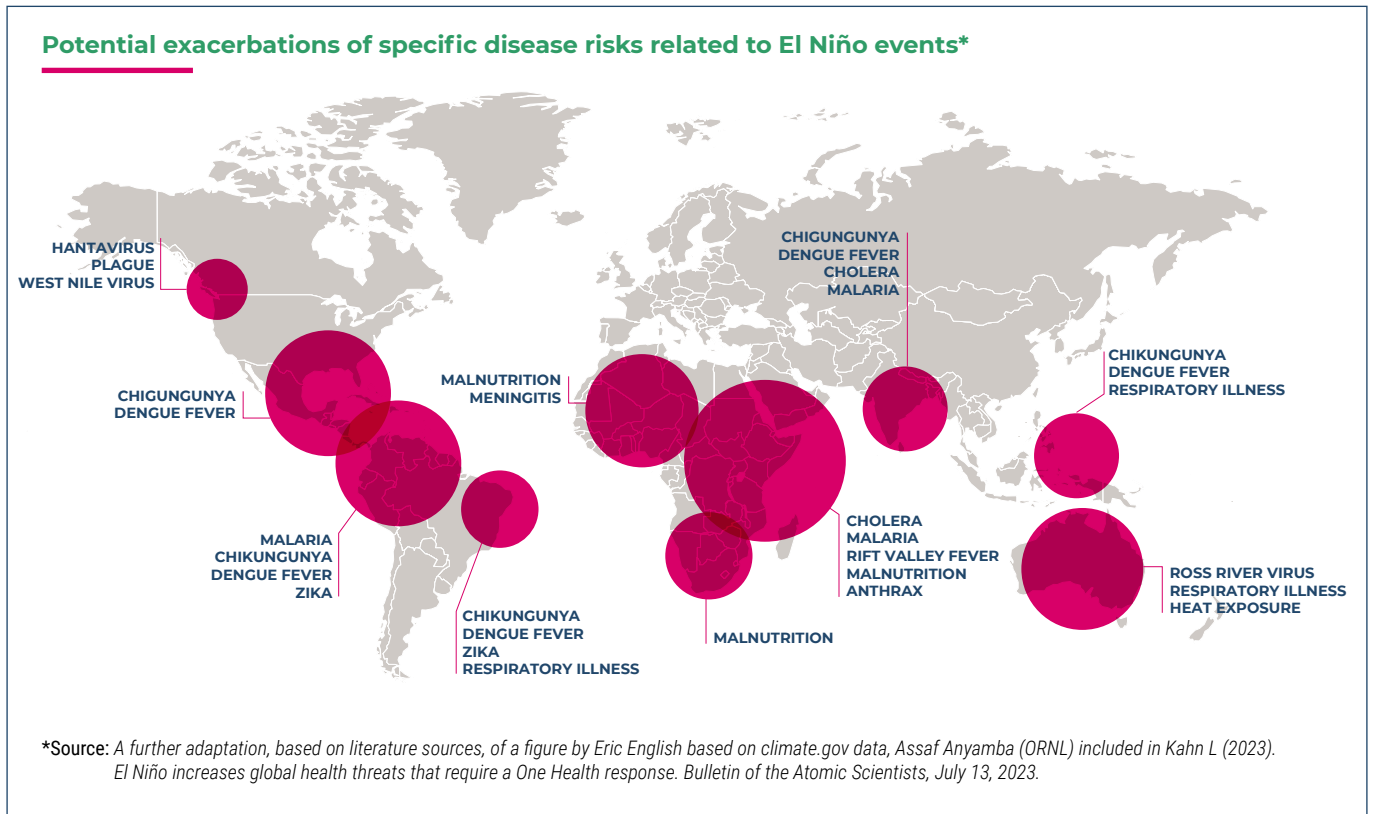
Here's what else to expect in the coming weeks and months:

- An El Niño Thematic Kit will offer tools, guidance, lessons learned, and best practices for RCCE professionals in Zambia, the East and Southern Africa region (ESAR), and around the globe.
- Journalists will come together for a Media Dialogue, which will offer practical tips about how to accurately report on El Niño from health experts and veteran journalists.
- Led by UNICEF and alongside the Zambia Red Cross, the Democratic Republic of Congo Red Cross, and ministries of health on both sides of the border, the Collective Service will facilitate analysis of cross-border dynamics and development of standard operating procedures to enhance RCCE preparedness and response for cholera.
- Common community misunderstandings and curiosities will be compiled in a newly-designed Questions Bank, so responders can proactively address them during future public health emergencies.
- The Collective Service will offer operational social science training and support, with a focus on qualitative data collection and analysis. This capacity-building project will prepare responders for future public health emergencies.
- A [Key Considerations Brief](#) has been developed in partnership with SSHAP, describing the implications of El Niño in the East and Southern Africa Region (ESAR) for Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) initiatives, based on previous comparable weather events.

BEYOND ZAMBIA: A regional approach to El Niño

The Collective Service has answered the call from ministries of health and/or partners from 14 countries anticipating health emergencies caused or exacerbated by El Niño. In addition to work in Zambia, Collective Service team members are developing coordinated approaches to community engagement to decrease the impact of disease outbreaks in Burundi, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

El Niño is more than a weather pattern—it is a public health emergency multiplier. The good news is that community feedback strategies and additional preparedness and response activities are driving improvements that will make a material difference in the lives of those impacted by this phenomenon. With interagency community feedback tools in place, governments and responders throughout the region will have the ability to leverage community data and keep more people safe and healthy.



LINKS:

- [El Niño Thematic Kit](#)
- Remote on-demand RCCE and CEA technical assistance and support is available through the [Collective Service Helpdesk](#).
- RCCE & CEA resources and tools for [responding to cholera](#)
- RCCE & CEA resources and tools for [responding to drought](#)
- [Social Science Training](#) is available for the effective integration of social science in health emergency interventions and policymaking.
- [Measuring Results in Social Behaviour Change Communication Programming](#)
- [Communicating with Communities in Epidemics... RCCE Readiness Kit](#)



Community members share health information and concerns with Zambia Red Cross volunteers. © American Red Cross/Brad Zerivitz

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The RCCE Collective Service enables collaboration between a wide range of organisations engaged in policy, practice, and research to strengthen coordination and increase the scale and quality of RCCE approaches, while also supporting a coordinated community-centered approach that is embedded across public health and humanitarian response efforts. This is a partnership between the WHO, UNICEF and IFRC, which leverages active support from the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), and key stakeholders from the public health and humanitarian sectors. The Collective Service provides operational support to the RCCE Technical Working group in East and Southern Africa. The work covered in this case study was primarily a partnership between the Collective Service, Ministry of Health Zambia, ZNPHI, USAID, Zambia Red Cross, Africa CDC, and FAO's ECTAD.

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