



# A summary of the IFRC guide on climate-smart programmes and humanitarian operations

IFRC and Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, May 2023

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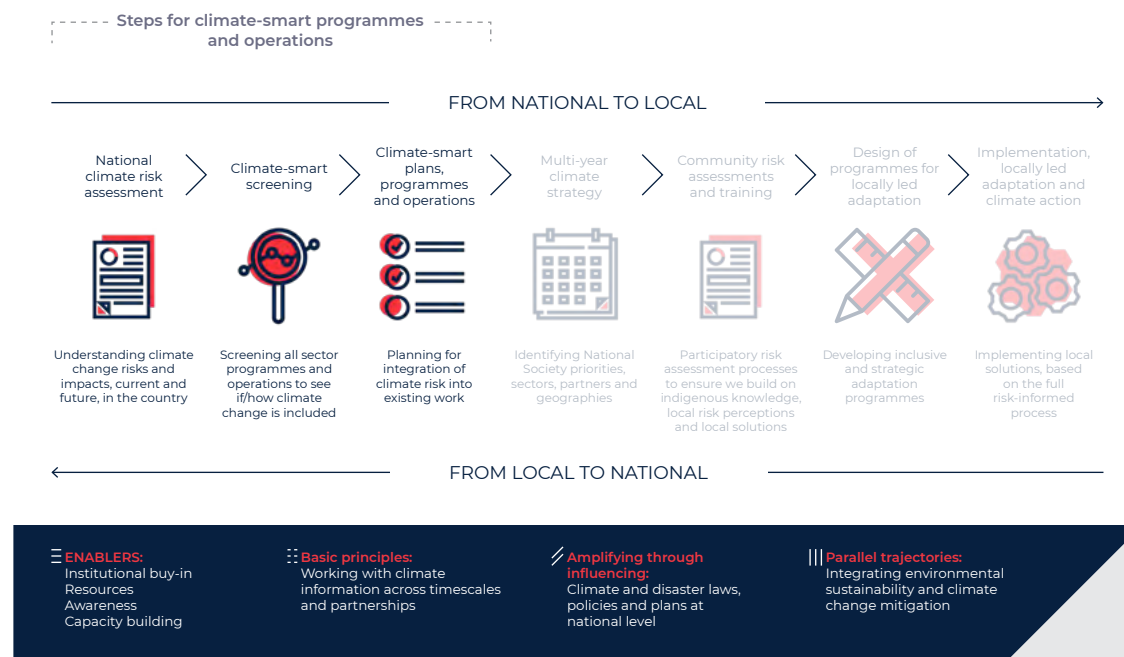
# 1. Introduction

This is a summary of the [IFRC guide on climate-smart programmes and humanitarian operations](#) (Climate Centre and IFRC, 2023). The guide supports National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the IFRC in making their programmes and operations climate-smart. It is filled with examples, resources and tools that can be applied easily to make our work climate smart. This shorter version distils the key concepts, messages and components of the longer guide and refers to relevant sections where further 'how to' information can be found.

Integrating climate risk management into all our programmes and operations is recognized as a priority in the [Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations](#), [IFRC Strategy 2030](#) and [Plan and Budget 2021–2025](#). The Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies have a long history of working on climate-related disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery. The methods proposed in the guide closely align with existing tools for our work across the disaster management continuum. In addition, the guide offers a climate lens by explaining the basic principles of working with climate information across timescales and offers sets of relevant questions that we can ask during the design and implementation of our programmes and operations.

The components of the guide will help to make National Societies stronger and more credible players in the fight against climate change. Making our work climate-smart is an important starting point on a broader Climate Action Journey aimed at addressing urgent climate adaptation needs and reducing the risks of those most vulnerable in the face of the climate crisis (Figure 1).

While the guide is extensive and detailed, it aims to be accessible to all National Societies and provides different choices on how to conduct the proposed steps based on the available funding and time as well as the ambitions of your



National Society. For instance, some of the steps can be light-touch when funds are limited, or you could begin by looking at just one programmatic sector of your National Society. If a National Society has the funds to conduct more in-depth assessments – for example, as part of a larger climate programme – a solid climate-smart screening of all programmes, plans and strategies can be carried out to deepen the level of integration of climate information into all ongoing work. In short, the guide is a flexible companion for anyone who seeks to integrate the use of climate and weather information into their existing work.

**Figure 1:** The steps of the Climate Action Journey; note how the climate-smart programming and operations (i.e., the guide) covers the first three steps.

## 2. What are climate-smart programmes and humanitarian operations?

In the IFRC network, being climate-smart means *using climate information across timescales* in designing and/or adjusting all our programmes and operations. In doing so, programmes and operations ensure that, at a minimum, they do not place people at increased risk in the future, considering likely new climate extremes and growing vulnerabilities. In addition, this approach offers the initial steps in the Climate Action Journey for the National Societies (Figure 1) to identify locally led adaptation needs and support communities to anticipate, absorb and adapt to climate change.

The guide focuses on the direct and indirect impacts of climate change in relation to weather and climate extremes and disasters as well as associated challenges to, for example, disaster management, livelihoods, water and food security, shelter and health. This includes ensuring that staff, volunteers and vulnerable people are not taken by surprise by predictable climate and weather extremes during the implementation of programmes and operations. These climate and weather extremes include more frequent and intense temperature extremes (heat/cold waves), droughts, floods, heavy precipitation and storms as well as slow-onset events such as sea level rise and salinization.

For the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the concept of 'climate-smart' is primarily focused on reducing the impacts of climate variability and change. In [Chapter 1](#) of the guide, we do, however, explain how it relates to other components, such as environmental sustainability and green response.

### BOX 1. Basic definitions

**What is climate action?** Reducing greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change (mitigation) and addressing the impacts of climate change (adaptation).

**What are climate-smart programmes and operations?** Integrating available climate and weather information, both short-term weather and seasonal forecasts and long-term climate projections, in designing and/or adjusting all programmes and operations to ensure that, at a minimum, they do not place people at increased risk from new climate extremes and, if possible/appropriate, empower

communities to anticipate, absorb and adapt to climate shocks and long-term changes.

**What is locally led adaptation?** Climate change adaptation is about taking action focused on increasing resilience to the current and future effects of climate change; locally led adaptation is simply owned by local partners: [eight principles](#) were developed to help ensure that local communities are empowered to lead sustainable and effective adaptation to climate change at the local level (Global Centre on Adaptation *et al*, 2021).



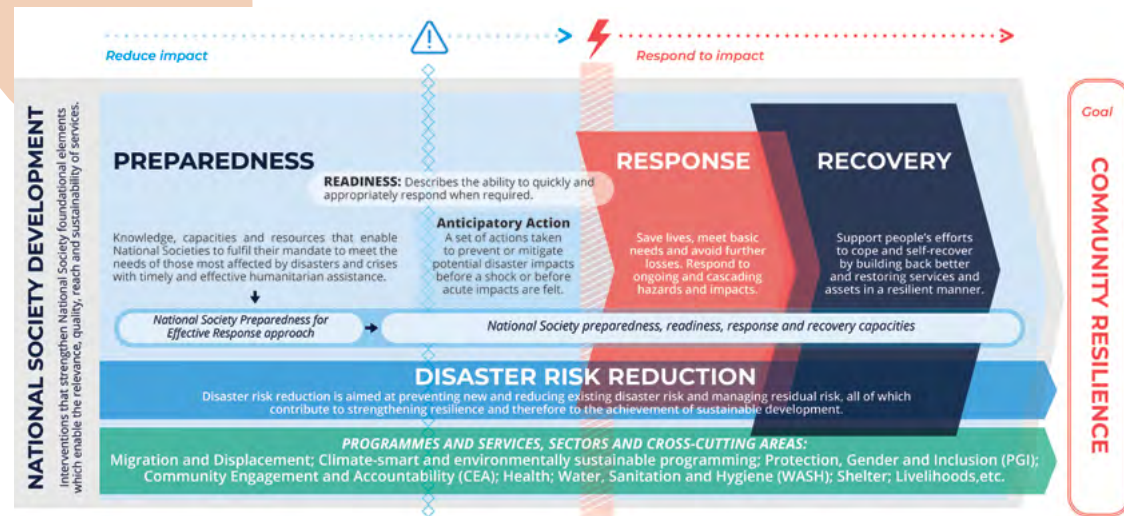
Chronic drought in Afghanistan got more publicity in 2022 and had wider impacts, but in this picture Afghan Red Crescent personnel provide cash relief to people affected by unseasonal floods at the end of July in the Spin Boldak district of Kandahar province. (Photo: ARCS via IFRC)

### 3. Why are climate-smart programmes and operations essential to the IFRC network?

The humanitarian system is under growing pressure from climate impacts that are aggravating existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, conflict and displacement. This requires a long-term vision from humanitarian organizations and donors with more emphasis on community resilience and locally led adaptation. Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers worldwide, at the forefront of the climate crisis, are experiencing first-hand the places that are becoming uninhabitable, the coastal areas that are now too risky to live in, and the land that is too dry to farm.

A combination of deep science-based concern and these powerful voices on the ground have placed the climate crisis at the top of the Red Cross and Red Crescent agenda. IFRC’s [Strategy 2030](#) emphasizes this, with a solid commitment to making all programmes and humanitarian operations ‘climate smart’ by 2025. This means that we must urgently integrate climate and weather information while reducing the risks of climate-related disasters in all areas of our work: disaster

Figure 2. IFRC disaster risk management continuum



management (Figure 2), health, WASH, shelter, livelihoods and other humanitarian operations. Many National Societies are already demonstrating strong leadership on climate action.



People in Ahoada East, in Nigeria’s River State, were moving around by boat after 2022 floods that scientists estimated were made 80 per cent more likely by climate change. (Photo: Nigerian Red Cross via IFRC)

## 4. How can we get to climate-smart programmes and operations?

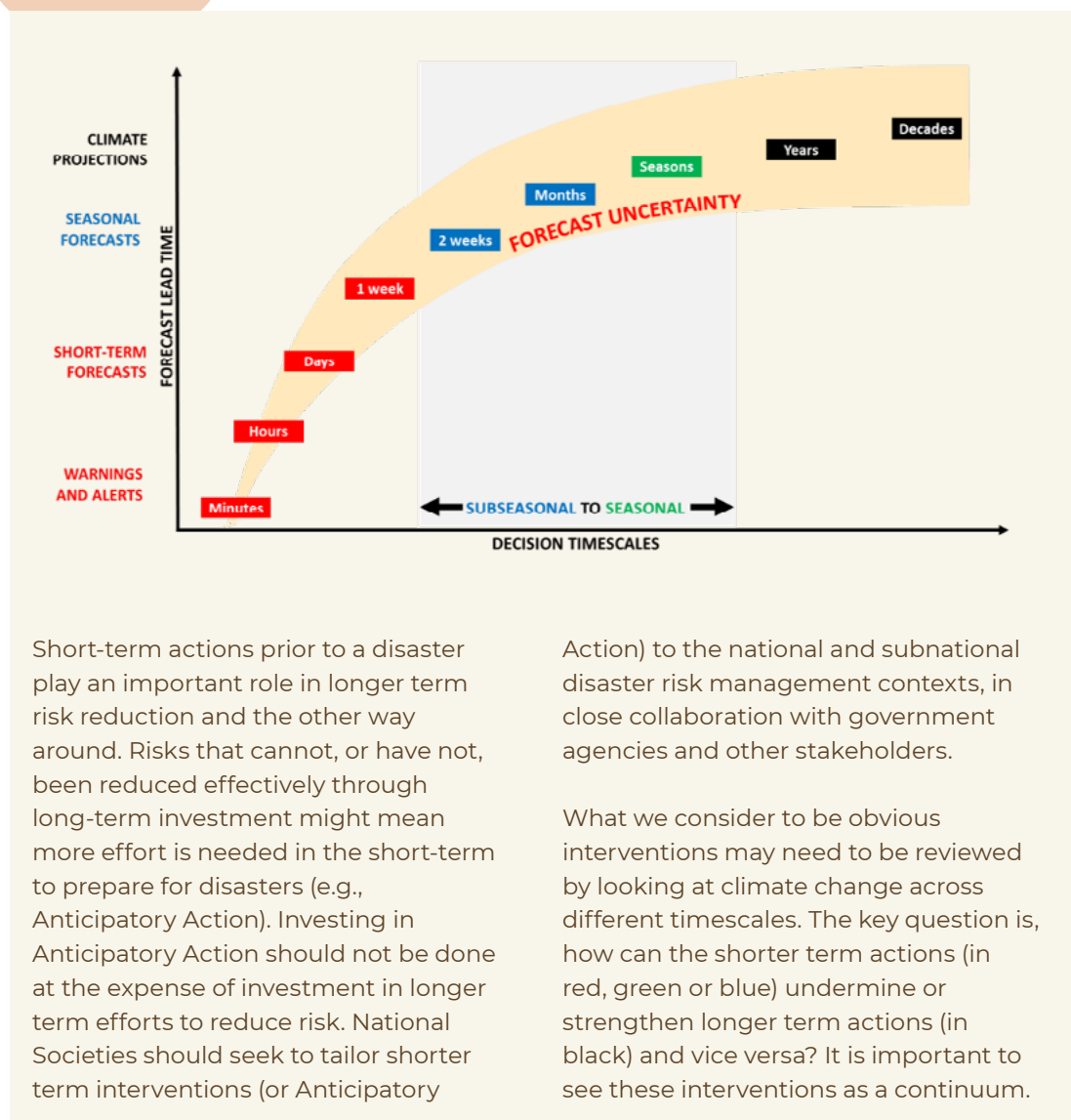
Climate information is obtained and applied by collaborating closely with governments across various line ministries, climate and weather specialists, vulnerable communities and other stakeholders. A key aspect of becoming climate-smart is making use of weather and seasonal forecasts (days and months) as well as longer term climate projections (years and decades). Local, traditional and indigenous knowledge should also be integrated and built upon.

[Chapter 2](#) of the guide explains the basic principles of using climate information across timescales and the collaborations needed to do so. Support is offered to National Societies on how to engage with partners, especially national weather services, and it explains how weather and seasonal forecasts as well as long-term climate projections should be used during the design and implementation of programmes and operations (Figure 3).

When it comes to monitoring climate and weather information, it is essential that this is done together with the national and/or local weather services in your country. They have the legal mandate to disseminate forecasts or warnings (sometimes this might be the disaster management authorities instead), but it is important to get the information from them. When necessary, secondary sources of information can be used (for instance, from international weather and climate experts or the WMO). Specialists from the IFRC and Climate Centre can support the process of accessing and interpreting such secondary information, which can only be used internally for planning purposes as we have no legal mandate to disseminate weather information.

The guide emphasizes that climate information should be seen as complementary to other types of knowledge and expertise. In Figure 4, we summarize the relevant types of information necessary to develop climate-smart interventions.

**Figure 3.** Timescales, lead times and uncertainty – and examples of potential climate-smart actions to take at different timescales. Adapted from [Next generation earth system prediction](#)



Short-term actions prior to a disaster play an important role in longer term risk reduction and the other way around. Risks that cannot, or have not, been reduced effectively through long-term investment might mean more effort is needed in the short-term to prepare for disasters (e.g., Anticipatory Action). Investing in Anticipatory Action should not be done at the expense of investment in longer term efforts to reduce risk. National Societies should seek to tailor shorter term interventions (or Anticipatory

Action) to the national and subnational disaster risk management contexts, in close collaboration with government agencies and other stakeholders.

What we consider to be obvious interventions may need to be reviewed by looking at climate change across different timescales. The key question is, how can the shorter term actions (in red, green or blue) undermine or strengthen longer term actions (in black) and vice versa? It is important to see these interventions as a continuum.

Examples of sector activity at different timescales are provided in the full guide. Here we offer two examples:

Sector: **WASH**

Lead time:

- 1 day to 1 week** Emergency WASH interventions, local solutions and Emergency Response Unit (ERU) deployment in case of an imminent disaster

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- 2 weeks to 2 months** Pre-emergency distribution of water purification tools and ERU units in case of potentially upcoming heavy rainfall

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- 3 months/ seasons** Plan for equitable safe water access and allocation during drought or flood in case of a potentially erratic season

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- Years, decades** Plan for rising water stress: Invest in landscape-scale solutions to ensure water availability through improved water efficiency and the conservation, restoration, and/or sustainable management of watersheds and aquifers, based on long-term projections of prolonged drought episodes  
 Build capacity at local RCRC branches, institutions and communities to:
  - expand green and grey local water storage infrastructure
  - manage efficient water storage.

Sector: **DISASTER MANAGEMENT**

Lead time:

- 1 day to 1 week** Activate site-specific warnings and evacuation plans in case of a cyclone warning

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- 2 weeks to 2 months** Public awareness refresher campaigns and messaging for actions to take prior to cyclones with high risks of storm surge causing floods  
 Pre-emergency positioning of personnel and relief items etc. for potentially upcoming cyclones  
 Alert local population and disaster management units of heightened risks

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- 3 months/ seasons** Campaigns to increase cyclone preparedness  
 Prevention campaigns for likely potential disease outbreaks after cyclones

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- Years, decades** Plan, advocate and raise awareness for increasing frequency or intensity of cyclones and initiate partnerships to lobby for long-term coastal investments that can reduce the impact of cyclones  
 Identify new risk zones and safe areas for floods

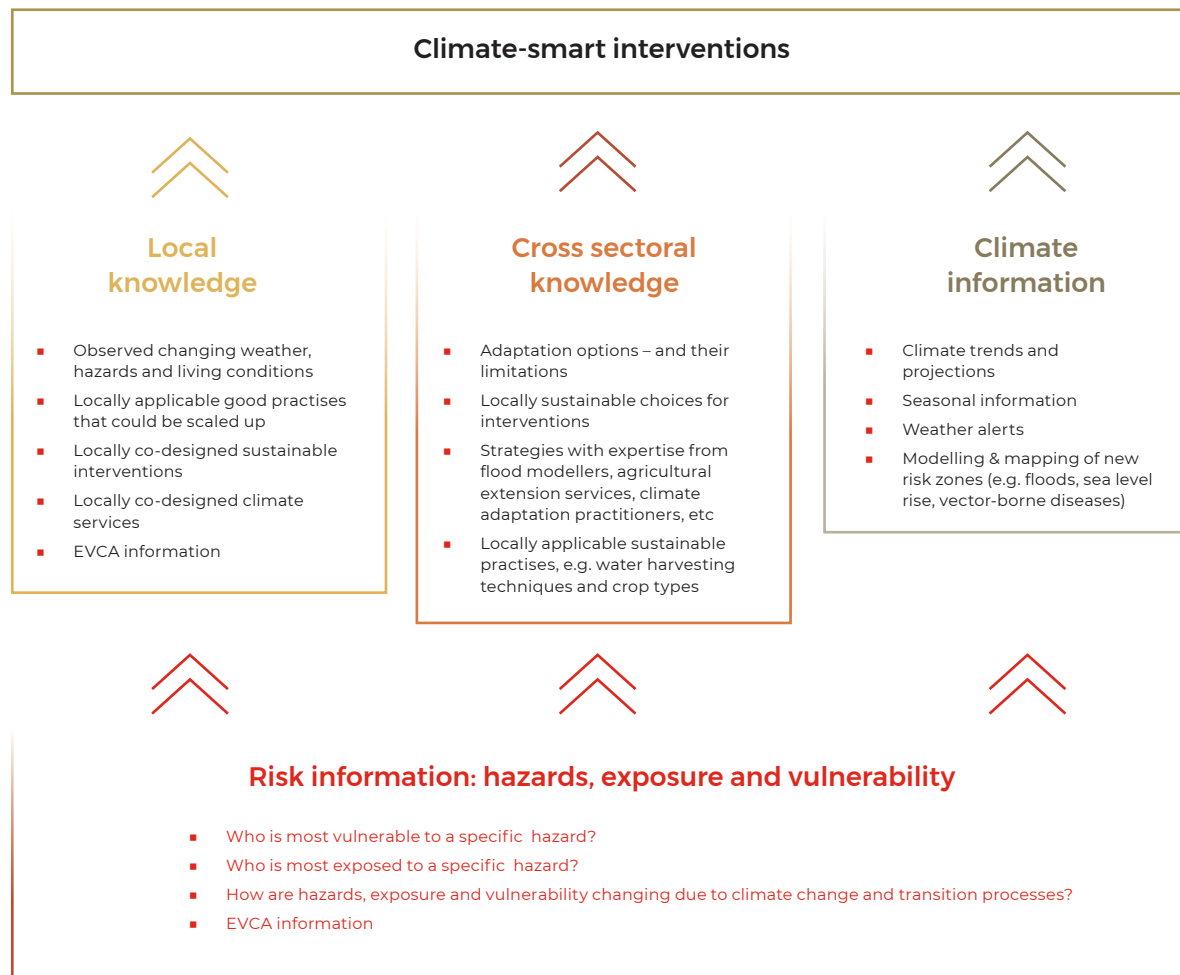


Italian Red Cross volunteers checking up on vulnerable elderly people in a 2018 heatwave, a hazard that is clearly attributable to climate change, but which has become increasingly predictable with forecasting and climate services provided by national weather services. (Photo: Emiliano Albensi/CRI via IFRC)

Chapters 3–6 of the guide explain the key steps in the process of making our programmes (Chapter 3), humanitarian operations (Chapter 4) and plans and strategies (Chapter 5) climate smart. As outlined in Figure 5, the three key steps are:

- 1. National climate risk assessment** to enhance understanding of the impacts of climate change hazards in your country as well as its affect on specific vulnerable groups and areas, and on different sectors such as disaster management, WASH and livelihoods.
- 2. Screening of ongoing operations for climate risks**, looking at all sectors to see how they are being or can be included.
- 3. Climate-smart planning** that involves identifying options for how to adjust the activities (making use of climate information at different timescales) so they are geared to face the increasing risks from climate change.

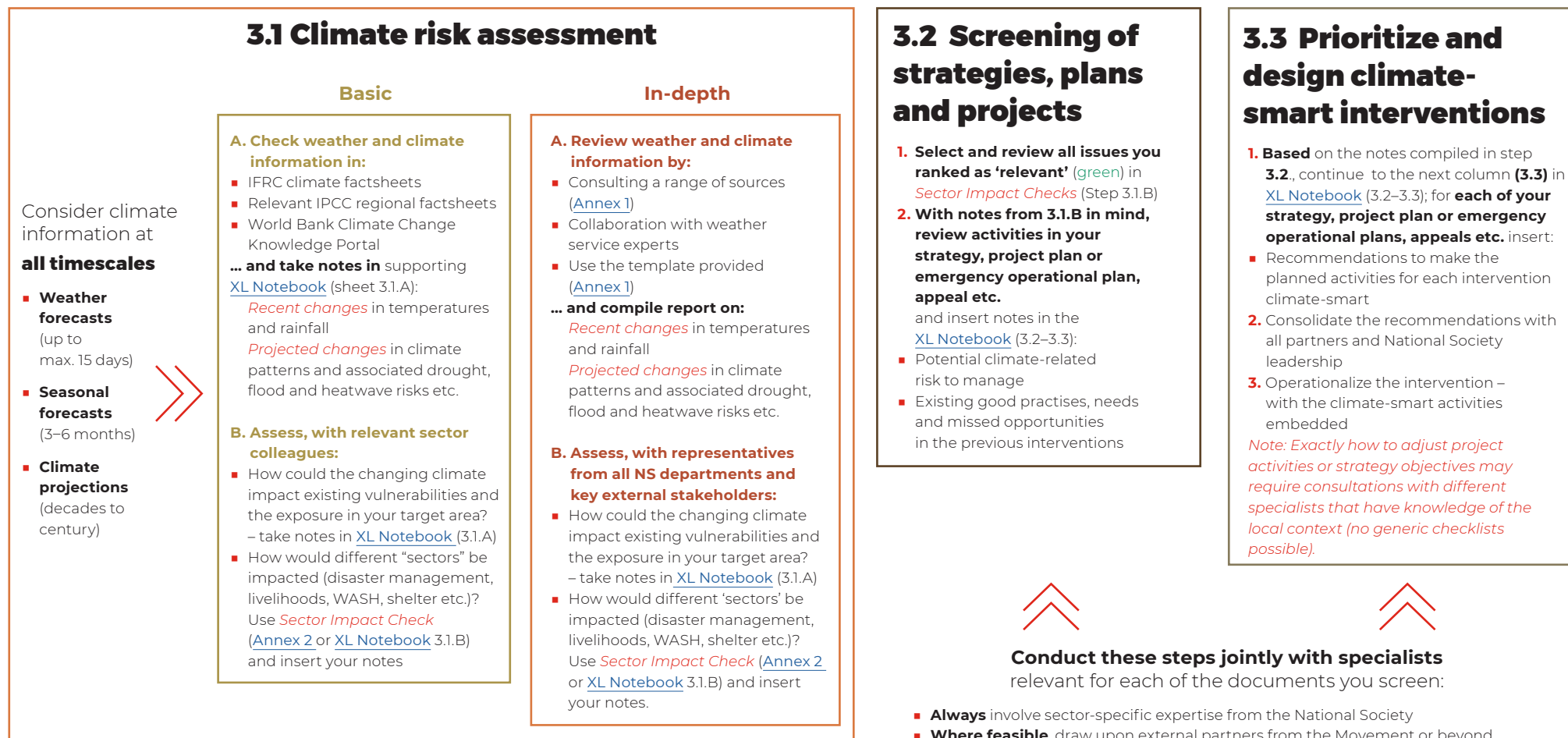
**Figure 4:** Combining knowledge to inform climate-smart programmes and emergency operations: Designing climate-smart activities cannot rely on climate information alone; ideally, local knowledge on 'good practises' that can be scaled up, and experiences from other organizations and research, can inform the improvements needed to design climate-smart activities.



The Guatemalan Red Cross celebrating the 2016 International Day for Disaster Reduction with an event in Villa Canales, just south of the capital Guatemala City, under the 'Vivir para contarlo' ('Live to tell') theme that included advice on health, water and sanitation, and resilience from Red Cross volunteers, all simple ways of avoiding climate-related disaster impacts. (Photo: Rolando Déleon/Climat Centre)

Figure 5 provides an overview and guidance on the steps to be taken. It proposes both a basic, light-touch approach when resources and/or time are limited as well as a more in-depth approach to climate-smart programmes and operations.

**Figure 5.** Overview of steps for national-level climate risk assessments (3.1), screening of strategies, programmes and operations (3.2), and prioritizing climate-smart interventions (3.3). Two levels of assessment are proposed: basic and in-depth.





## 5. What tools are available to support the design of climate-smart programmes and operations?

The guide shows how making programmes and operations climate-smart can be done in a straightforward way, which complements our existing work.

Before starting the climate-smart programming and operations process, it is recommended that a climate working group is set up as well as an individual who coordinates and leads the process. This is then followed by a mapping of key stakeholders and a desk review (see [Box 12](#) of the guide).

The supporting [XL Notebook](#) can aid the simple application of the proposed steps. In addition, the types of questions we need to ask ourselves to ensure our work can withstand climate shocks and stresses are provided per sector in [Annex 2](#). This annex sets out the change of mindset that we believe is necessary to become climate smart.

The screening process often starts with a joint workshop and the findings need to be consulted and validated, before moving on to climate-smart planning. This means that after consolidating all of the discussions and information gathered at the initial screening workshop, a validation workshop with external experts and cross-departmental colleagues needs to be organized. This workshop can lead to a joint reflection on proposed tweaks to activities and programmes to make them climate-smart and can bring new and innovative ideas to the table from outside the organization.

For humanitarian operations, the guide offers specific reflections on existing IFRC tools for emergencies (available at [go.ifrc](#)) in [Chapter 4](#) and offers climate-smart enablers and steps in the different phases of the disaster risk management continuum:

**4.1 Preparedness** (reflections primarily on Preparedness for Effective Response)

**4.2 Anticipatory Action** (reflections on linkages between short-term Anticipatory Action and long-term adaptation and resilience needs)

**4.3 Emergency Response** (reflections on, for instance, Emergency Appeal, Operational Strategy and Implementation Plan, Emergency Needs Assessment)

**4.4 Recovery** (reflections on the revised IFRC Guide to Supporting Resilient Recovery).

It is increasingly urgent to make humanitarian operations climate-smart, having witnessed how additional disasters sometimes batter already-affected populations during ongoing emergency operations. Doing so aims to make our humanitarian operations resilient to extreme weather events and prepare people in these at-risk areas for longer term change.

All of the annexes in the guide offer National Societies direct and practical tools and templates:

**Annex 1** offers a template, resources and guidance for compiling a National Climate Risk Assessment.

**Annex 2** is a game changer when it comes to asking the right questions. To enhance our understanding of how climate change might affect activities in different areas of our work, we offer a list of example questions per area of work.

**Annex 3** offers multiple examples of good climate-smart practice from around the globe – a testament that we already have experience in climate-smart programmes and operations.

**Annexes 4** and **5** offer more in-depth ‘how to’ guidance relating to [Chapters 2](#) and [4](#).

**Annex 6** offers a glossary of all the terms used in the guide.



German Red Cross  
Integrated Climate  
Change Adaptation  
programme in Teso and  
Karamoja sub-regions.  
(Photo: Denis Onyodi/  
URCS-DRK-  
Climate Centre)

## Final words...

Climate action can no longer exist in a silo or vacuum. Instead, *climate-smart operations* and a supporting framework embedded through the *Climate Action Journey* can create the necessary structure to ask bold questions and make key decisions for mainstreaming climate action, including in Disaster Risk Management; Livelihoods, Agriculture and Food Security; Health; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene; Shelter, Housing and Settlements; Migration and Displacement as well as cross-sectoral climate-smart programmes<sup>1</sup> which are not immune to the impacts of a changing climate. The guide shows how climate-smart programming and operations can be achieved in a straightforward way, complementing our existing work and enhancing the effectiveness of our humanitarian activities in a changing climate.

<sup>1</sup> These can include design and implementation maintenance, and non-technical (advocacy, institutional and capacity-building) measures, enhancing access to information, research and behavioural change, financial and market-based measures (incl. insurance), advocacy for policy and legislative measures.



Training for integrated risk management was carried out in several Indian states like here in Gujarat's Navsari district as part of the Netherlands-supported PfR project, shortly after the Indian Red Cross signed an MoU with the government to share meteorological information and data to assist community resilience. (Photo: PfR)