



# EMBEDDING EDUCATION AND CHILD PROTECTION IN ANTICIPATORY ACTION

**Lessons from the Zimbabwe Red  
Cross Society's School Feeding  
Intervention in Binga**

**CASE STUDY**



Photo description: A female volunteer cook and child participating in the school feeding program for children in Binga, Zimbabwe  
Photo credit: Rumbidzai Nenzou, IFRC

## Introduction

Zimbabwe, a country in Southern Africa, has long struggled with climate-induced disasters, with El Niño-driven droughts severely impacting food security, education, and child protection. Binga District, in Matabeleland North Province, is among the most drought-prone areas, facing chronic food shortages, limited infrastructure, and high rates of school dropout, absenteeism, child labor, and early marriage.

The Zimbabwe Red Cross Society (ZRCS) has been at the forefront of both humanitarian response and resilience-building in vulnerable communities. In collaboration with communities, relevant government ministries, and partners, ZRCS developed the Early Action Protocol (EAP) as a key anticipatory action mechanism. This locally driven approach helps identify and address community needs before crises escalate, ensuring children remain protected and essential services continue uninterrupted.

Community focus group discussions revealed deep concerns about the well-being of children, particularly the risks of hunger, child marriage, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Participants, including children

themselves, emphasized the need for targeted interventions to address these issues through education. In response, these priorities were integrated into community-based efforts to enhance protection and resilience.

The Early Action Protocol (EAP) for drought follows a two-phase trigger system, enabling continuous monitoring and the timely activation of targeted interventions. The first trigger, activated in October 2023, focused on livelihood protection measures, including seed distribution, livestock deworming, and community sensitization. As food insecurity worsened, the second trigger, activated in September 2024, initiated direct humanitarian assistance, notably school feeding, to support vulnerable households and mitigate protection risks for children. These phased interventions ensure a proactive response to escalating drought impacts.

## The Early Action Protocol for Drought: Triggers and Response

### A. Understanding the Early Action Protocol

ZRCS's Early Action Protocol (EAP) is designed to mitigate the impacts of El Niño-induced droughts, with a geographic focus on Binga District and other high-risk areas. Interventions are activated based on continuous monitoring of food security and climatic conditions, ensuring a timely and targeted response.

The first trigger was activated when early warning systems and food security assessments signaled worsening drought conditions. This prompted a series of anticipatory actions, including the distribution of drought-tolerant seeds, livestock deworming, and awareness-raising sessions on the potential consequences of drought. To ensure children were informed and protected, child-friendly early warning messages were disseminated in schools by volunteer school health coordinators in collaboration with the Meteorological Department. These messages provided essential information on water management and health risks such as cholera, reinforcing the protective nature of the intervention.



Photo description: What was once a riverbed near the community of Binga, Zimbabwe, is now just a carpet of dry sand, due to the prolonged drought that has hit large sections of the country.  
Photo credit: Rumbidzai Nenzou, IFRC

The second trigger was confirmed when food insecurity levels deteriorated further, leading to the activation of direct humanitarian assistance. The school feeding program was launched alongside complementary interventions, ensuring that food-insecure children received fortified meals rich in essential nutrients to support school attendance and retention. These actions were integrated with community protection strategies to mitigate negative coping mechanisms identified during focus group discussions.

## **B. Supporting Education Through School Feeding and Family Food Assistance**

In coordination with humanitarian partners, ZRCS prioritized 11 primary schools without existing feeding programs, aligning with community priorities to protect children from SGBV, child labor, and early marriage. The intervention provided daily Corn Soya Blend (CSB) meals to over 5,378 children (2,635 boys and 2,743 girls), ensuring continued school attendance while reducing protection risks. To further support a safe learning environment, the program incorporated hygiene promotion, including the distribution of soap and hygiene materials, contributing to improved health and sanitation in schools.



Photo description: A young boy in ECD receives his daily serving of warm, nourishing Corn Soya Blend (CSB) porridge during the school feeding program.

Photo credit: Rumbidzai Nenzou, IFRC

Beyond schools, ZRCS extended its support to vulnerable families, reaching more than 3,400 people across Wards 7, 8, 9, 10, and 13 with food aid. In Ward 9 of Binga District, 67-year-old Esnathi Mudhimba, who cares for her sick granddaughter, relies on the 10-kilogram bag of maize meal provided per person in a household as a vital source of sustenance.

***"This food is keeping us alive" Esnathi shares. "Before this, I sold baobab fruits to survive, but now I'm too old, and my granddaughter can't help me. Without this support, I don't know what we would have done."***



Photo description: Monica Mpande of Mupambe village is among the 3,400 vulnerable people impacted by the El Niño-induced drought in Binga District's Wards 9 and 10 who received food aid.  
Photo credit: Rumbidzai Nenzou, IFRC

For 52-year-old Monica Mpande, who lives in Mupambe village, food aid is more than just a meal—it provides parents with the means to prioritize their children's education. ***"With this food assistance, I can save a little money to buy books for my children" she says. "It gives me hope that we'll get through this."***

ZRCS designed this intervention through a participatory approach, conducting separate focus group discussions with children and consulting key stakeholders. These discussions highlighted the severe impact of food insecurity on children, increasing their vulnerability to child labor, early marriage, and other high-risk survival strategies.

Paul Moyo, Disaster Management Coordinator at Zimbabwe Red Cross Society, explained the urgency behind the intervention:

***"We prioritized school feeding as an anticipatory action after seeing firsthand how food insecurity was driving children out of school. Without access to meals, many were forced to drop out, increasing their risk of child labor, early marriage, and exploitation. This program was not just about nutrition—it was a critical intervention to keep children in school, safeguard their well-being, and secure their future."***

## A. Increased Access to Education and Learning Environment Improvements

School attendance increased from 74% to 90–95%, accompanied by a measurable rise in enrollment across targeted schools. Attendance data was recorded through daily school registers and analyzed to track trends before and after the introduction of the feeding program.

***“For many of these children, this is their only meal of the day,”*** says a teacher from Siasundu Primary School, one of the schools benefiting from the program. ***“We’ve seen remarkable improvements—attendance has increased, dropouts have decreased, and the children are far more attentive in class. It’s truly making a difference in their lives.”***

Before the intervention, many children stayed home due to a lack of food. One parent described the impact: ***“Before the feeding program, my child often stayed home because we had no food. Now, I know she will eat at school, and I make sure she attends every day.”***

Teachers also observed improvements in student engagement, with one stating, ***“With food at school, my son now answers questions in class and joins group activities.”*** The benefits of proper nutrition on concentration, cognitive development, and participation were clearly reflected in students’ behavior and learning outcomes.

The intervention also contributed to a safer learning environment. Reports indicated a reduction in bullying and theft, as students had equal access to meals. The school headmaster remarked, ***“Fewer fights happen now because all children eat together.”***

## B. Protection and Well-being Measures

The school environment improved with stronger peer support networks, contributing to lower dropout rates and reducing child protection risks. Designed with safeguarding principles at its core, the school feeding intervention included a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) developed by ZRCS to define child protection roles and responsibilities.

To address the vulnerabilities associated with food distribution, teachers and volunteers received training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), ensuring a protective environment for children.

Safeguarding measures were further reinforced through structured feedback mechanisms. Schools established reporting platforms where children could safely express concerns and report any protection or safety issues, strengthening accountability and responsiveness. However, no child protection or abuse cases were formally reported.

## C. Community Engagement and Ownership



Photo description: Two parents actively contribute to the daily preparation of porridge as part of the school feeding program.  
Photo credit: Rumbidzai Nenzou, IFRC

Approximately 175 parents, volunteers, and community leaders actively contributed to the daily preparation of porridge, made from a blend of corn and soybeans, ensuring the program's sustainability. Households provided essential resources such as firewood, time, and labor, while volunteers took on cooking and monitoring responsibilities. Parents were also required to be available to address any issues that arose within the feeding program.

To enhance program effectiveness and community ownership, training sessions were conducted on hygiene, food safety, and child safeguarding, equipping participants with skills that extended beyond the feeding program itself. These efforts fostered long-term ownership and strengthened community resilience.

School Development Committees (SDCs), in collaboration with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the Department of Social Development, and the Ministry of Health and Child Care, played a pivotal role in mobilizing support and ensuring adherence to safeguarding standards, reinforcing the protective environment for children.

## Challenges

### A. Water Scarcity and Impact on School Feeding

Seven of the eleven participating schools faced severe water shortages, impacting meal preparation and overall program implementation. This challenge highlighted the urgent need for sustainable water access solutions, such as borehole drilling or water trucking, to ensure the continuity of school feeding programs in drought-prone regions.

Consultative engagement meetings were held with parents and school development committees to address water shortages. In the short term, parents committed to delivering water to schools, while ZRCS engaged district-level water management authorities to explore permanent solutions.

## B. Nutrition Adequacy Concerns

While portion sizes adhered to WFP guidelines, variations in age-based nutritional needs led to differing perceptions among students. Additionally, some schools faced stock depletion before scheduled replenishments, highlighting the need for adjustments in supply chain management to ensure consistent meal availability.

In anticipation of a 10% increase in school enrollment, the program adjusted stock levels and proactively adapted portion sizes to meet the growing demand. Additionally, in February 2025, ration distribution was reviewed and supplemented with additional allocations to prevent food expiration, ensuring a steady and sufficient supply.

## Lessons Learned

1. **School Feeding as a Protection Strategy:** Providing meals in crisis-affected areas directly reduces protection risks such as school dropout, child labor, and early marriage. The intervention also fostered a safer learning environment, with reports indicating a decline in bullying and food theft, as all students had equal access to meals.
2. **Strengthening Education-Protection Linkages:** Integrating protection measures into education initiatives enhances outcomes for children, parents, and the broader education community. Strengthening safeguarding awareness within schools equips children with knowledge of their rights and access to reporting mechanisms while also empowering parents and educators to create a safer, more supportive learning environment. This collective approach fosters trust, well-being, and a culture of protection that benefits everyone involved.
3. **Enhancing Program Sustainability:** Sustained community engagement will be crucial in maintaining the program's protective benefits and ensuring long-term impact.

## Conclusion

The ZRCS school feeding intervention in Binga District showcases how anticipatory action can effectively integrate child protection and education into food security and livelihoods programming. By addressing nutrition, school retention, and safeguarding in a holistic manner, the intervention not only reduced the risks of child exploitation but also enhanced learning environments for vulnerable children.

Looking ahead, embedding violence prevention strategies within Early Action Protocol (EAP) frameworks will be essential to further strengthening child protection outcomes within anticipatory action models.