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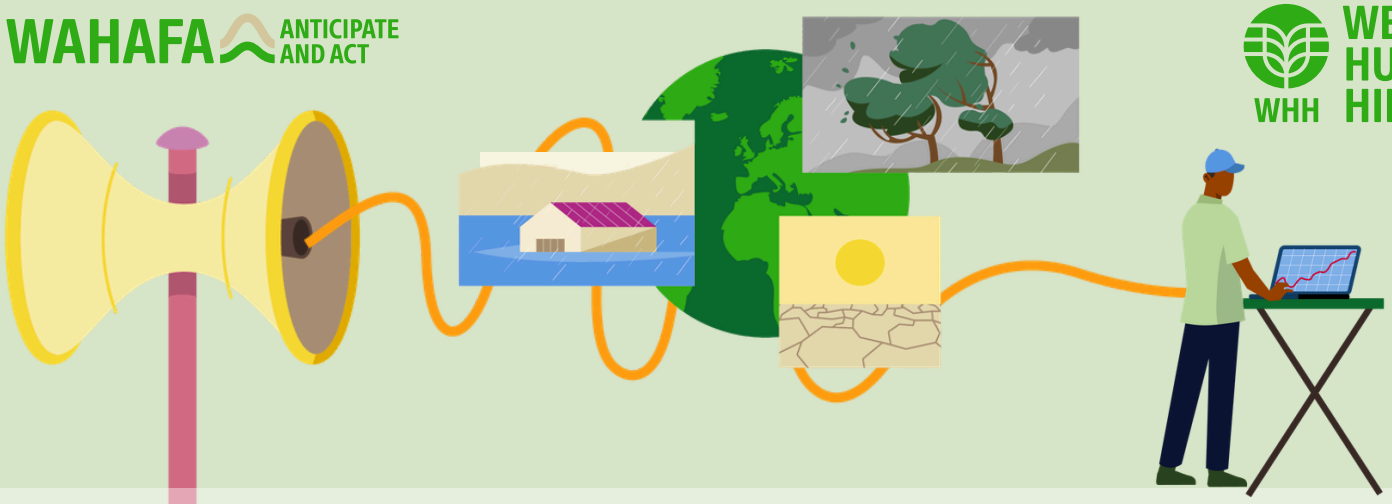

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Briefing Note

Strengthening 2026 El Niño: Potential Implications for Regional Climate Risks, Agriculture, Food Security, Humanitarian Preparedness, DRR and Anticipatory Action

Published: 13 October 2026
Analysis based on information available as of 9 October 2026

Purpose and scope

This briefing synthesises recent climate outlooks and early-warning information from WMO and the WMO Coordination Mechanism, NOAA/CPC, CCSR/IRI, WMO Lead Centre multi-model forecasts, ICPAC/GHACOF, national meteorological services, FEWS NET, GEOGLAM Crop Monitor, FAO-SWALIM and related humanitarian early-warning sources.

It supports humanitarian, disaster risk reduction, preparedness and anticipatory action discussions on the 2026/27 El Niño, focusing on regional climate risks, agriculture and food security, priority monitoring areas and operational preparedness.

This is an early-warning and preparedness synthesis, not a deterministic impact forecast. Seasonal forecasts indicate changes in probability, not certainty; local outcomes depend on other climate drivers, short-term weather, hydrology, exposure and vulnerability.

Key messages

El Niño has reached very strong intensity and is expected to remain very strong through late 2026. October NOAA guidance places OND entirely in the very-strong category, while WMO forecasts an OND Niño 3.4 anomaly near +3.7°C, peaking around December.

A positive Indian Ocean Dipole is expected during OND, strongest around October–November and weakening thereafter, adding to the wet East African short-rains signal.

East Africa faces a dual-risk situation: drought impacts persist in unimodal areas, while above-normal OND rainfall raises flood, landslide and waterborne-disease risks across much of the Greater Horn.

Southern Africa has entered a critical agricultural preparedness period, with below-normal rainfall, delayed or erratic onset, dry spells and high temperatures expected across important southern and central areas.

Central America, the southern Caribbean and northern tropical South America remain major drought and heat concern areas, while much of the Maritime Continent also retains a strong dry signal.

Food-security effects may peak in 2027. FEWS NET identifies unimodal East Africa and Southern Africa as the highest-concern regions, with climate impacts interacting with markets, conflict and existing livelihood stress.

Current ENSO and IOD situation

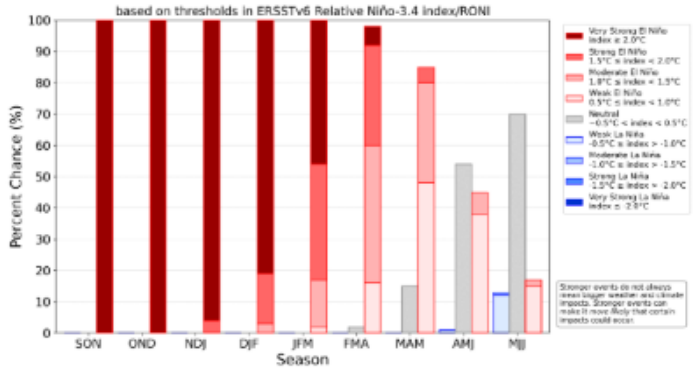
El Niño

El Niño strengthened rapidly through September and has reached **very strong intensity**. FEWS NET reports that the ≥2°C threshold was reached in September; WMO forecasts further strengthening through OND, with a seasonal Niño 3.4 anomaly near +3.7°C and a peak around December. Gradual weakening becomes more likely during 2027.

Indian Ocean Dipole

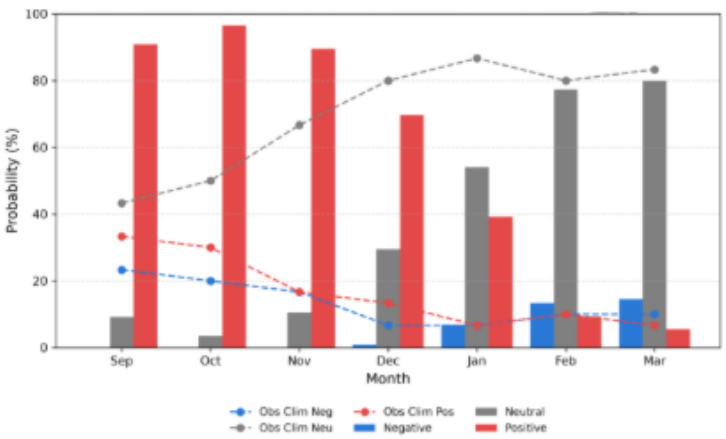
The sources differ slightly on the observed August IOD classification because of different index methodologies, but they converge on a **positive IOD during October–December**, followed by weakening toward neutral from around January 2027.

NOAA CPC ENSO Strength Probabilities (issued October 2026)



ENSO strength probabilities for the Niño-3.4 relative sea surface temperature index (5°N-5°S, 170°W-120°W) minus tropical mean (20°N-20°S). The relative index is re-scaled to match the variance of the traditional index. Figure updated 8 October 2026. Higher resolution image/table: https://cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/enso/roni/strengths/

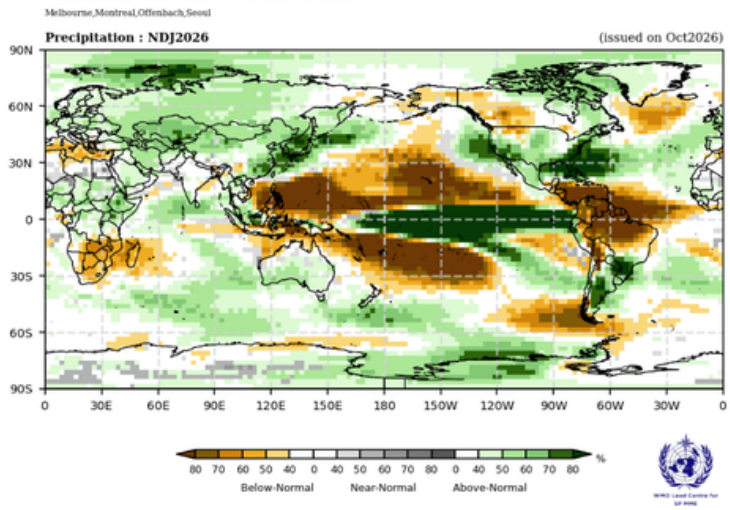
Model-Based Probabilistic IOD Forecasts from September 2026



CCSR/IRI IOD outlook, published 21 Sep 2026.

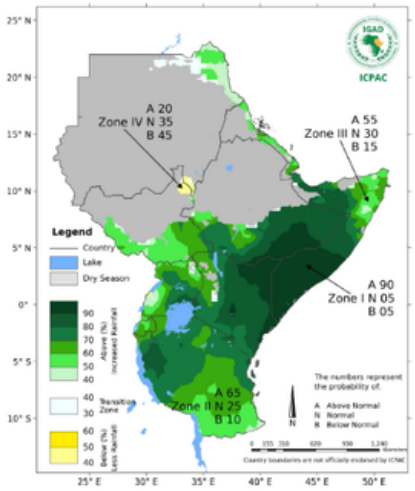
Regional outlook and implications

Probabilistic Multi-Model Ensemble Forecast



WMO Probabilistic Multi-Model Precipitation Forecast – November 2026–January 2027 (issued October 2026)

Rainfall Probabilistic Forecast October-December



Zone I: In this zone (dark green), the probability for the above-normal category is the highest (90%). Probabilities for the normal and below-normal categories are 5% and 5%, respectively.

Zone II: In this zone (green), the above-normal rainfall (wetter) category also has the highest probability. For the most widespread green shade, the probability for above-normal category is 65%; the probabilities for the normal and below-normal categories are 25% and 10%, respectively.

Zone III: In this zone (light green), the above-normal rainfall (wetter) category has the highest probability (55%). The probabilities for the normal and below-normal categories are 30% and 15%, respectively.

Zone IV: In this zone (yellow), the below-normal rainfall (drier) category has the highest probability (45%). The probabilities for the near-normal and above-normal categories are 35% and 20%, respectively.

Probability forecast of rainfall for various zones within the GHA region for October - December 2026. Grey shading indicates regions where OND is climatologically a dry season.

East Africa

Severe June–September rainfall deficits continue to affect crop production, pasture and livelihoods across parts of Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Karamoja and western Kenya. These legacy impacts will persist even as the short-rains signal turns wetter.

For OND, ICPAC favours above-normal rainfall across most rain-receiving parts of the Greater Horn, with the **strongest wet signal over southern Ethiopia, central-to-southern Somalia and northeastern Kenya**. Kenya's latest October forecast also favours above-average rainfall over much of the country. The main risks are riverine and flash flooding, landslides, displacement, infrastructure damage and waterborne disease, alongside possible recovery of pasture and water resources.

Somalia warrants particularly close hydrological and WASH monitoring. FAO-SWALIM identifies 71 strategic water sources at very high risk and 524 at high risk, with Middle Shabelle, Hiraan, Lower Shabelle, Gedo and Bakool among the most exposed areas. A high-impact flood season remains a credible preparedness scenario, but the magnitude, timing and exact spatial concentration of flooding remain uncertain.

West Africa and the Sahel

West Africa remains mixed rather than uniformly dry. Localised rainfall and vegetation deficits affected parts of Chad, Niger and Mali during the 2026 rainy season, while conditions were generally more favourable farther south. Consequently, crop water requirements are not being met in these areas due to below-normal precipitation and above-normal temperatures, suggesting reduced agricultural yields in 2026. Chances are elevated for low streamflow and water availability across parts of West Africa due to recent below-normal precipitation. As the season ends, monitoring should shift toward harvest outcomes, pasture, household stocks and markets. Conflict and economic pressures remain major drivers of humanitarian need.

Central Africa

There is no single Central African El Niño pattern. WMO favours above-normal rainfall over parts of equatorial Africa, while DRC's October outlook combines wetter eastern/southern areas with drier western zones. Flood and dry-spell risks should therefore be interpreted sub-nationally alongside conflict and displacement.

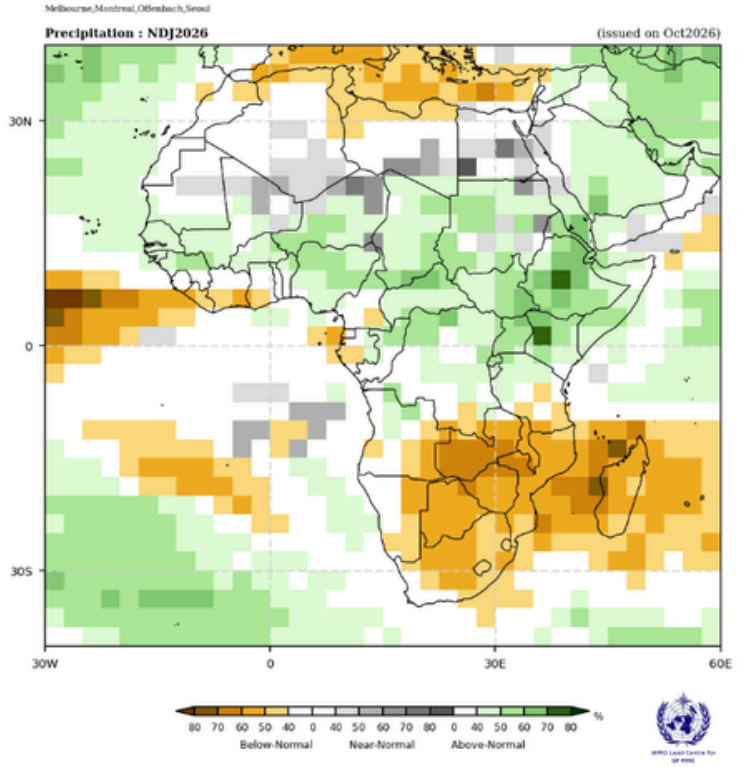
Regional outlook and implications

Southern Africa

Southern Africa is entering the critical crop-establishment period with a persistent dry signal. **Seasonal guidance favours below-normal rainfall across much of the southern half of the region**, **with delayed or erratic onset, prolonged dry spells and above-normal temperatures** important concerns for Zimbabwe, southern/central Mozambique, southern/central Malawi, southern Zambia, southern Angola, Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia and parts of Madagascar and South Africa.

National forecasts reinforce the regional concern: Zimbabwe favours below-normal OND rainfall; southern and central Malawi favour normal-to-below-normal rainfall with delayed onset; and Mozambique favours below-average OND rainfall over much of the country. Good 2026 cereal carryover stocks may cushion near-term markets, but the larger food-security risk lies in the 2027 harvest and subsequent lean season.

Probabilistic Multi-Model Ensemble Forecast



Asia

South Asia

WMO continues to favour below-normal OND rainfall across much of the Indian Subcontinent, although October-initialised NDJ guidance is more mixed over parts of India. Pakistan remains the clearest current agricultural concern after poor June–September rainfall in Sindh, Balochistan, southern Punjab and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; a potentially wetter October–April period may support rabi recovery and should be monitored separately. The ongoing El Niño and its forecast strength in late 2026 and early 2027 increase the chances of above-normal precipitation in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the 2026-27 wet season. There are increased chances of above-normal snow accumulation, the effects of which increase the chances of above-normal agricultural yields, as well as springtime flooding and winter road blockages resulting in limited access to markets and resources.

Southeast Asia and the Maritime Continent

A strong dry signal persists across much of the Maritime Continent. Drought is affecting rice in Thailand and Cambodia, while the Philippines, Viet Nam and Myanmar have also experienced localized heavy-rainfall and tropical-cyclone impacts. Water storage, rice production and wildfire risk remain priorities.

Central Asia

Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan retain a generally wetter signal alongside above-normal temperatures, potentially improving winter-wheat and water conditions while increasing localized heavy-precipitation, snow and landslide risks.

Central America and the Caribbean

Drought and heat remain major concerns after poor Primera production and a difficult start to the Segunda/Postrera season. September-initialised models show >70% probability of below-normal OND rainfall across Honduras, Nicaragua, eastern Guatemala, eastern El Salvador and southern Central America; Haiti also remains drier and hotter than normal. The main concerns are crop losses, water stress and increased market dependence among vulnerable households.

Middle East

The Middle East remains mixed and seasonally changing. Seasonal guidance favours wetter-than-normal conditions across Turkey, Cyprus and parts of the Middle East and northern Arabian Peninsula during OND, alongside widespread above-normal temperatures. Yemen remains a particular concern because antecedent dryness continues to affect crop and water conditions, while humanitarian impacts are driven mainly by conflict, economic stress and import dependence. El Niño-related international wheat-market developments may therefore add further pressure.

Northern South America and the Amazon

WMO shows a robust below-normal OND rainfall signal across northwestern and northern South America and much of the Amazon, while southeastern South America is comparatively wetter.

Monitoring should focus on soil moisture, water resources, wildfire risk and rainfed agriculture; localized heavy rainfall can still occur within the broader dry signal.

Sectoral implications

Crops and agriculture

The main risks are delayed or failed planting, dry spells during sensitive growth stages, high evapotranspiration and reduced water availability. Current losses are evident in unimodal East Africa, Central America, Pakistan, and parts of Southeast Asia, while Southern Africa is entering the critical planting period. Excess rainfall in East Africa may also cause waterlogging and crop damage.

Livestock and pastoral systems

Dry and hot conditions reduce pasture and water availability in unimodal East Africa and Southern Africa. Wetter short rains may support recovery in the eastern Horn but can also restrict mobility, increase disease risk and cause livestock losses where flooding becomes severe.

Food security and markets

The strongest food-security concern remains Southern Africa and unimodal East Africa, with many impacts likely to peak in 2027. Climate shocks will interact with conflict, prices, agricultural labour, purchasing power and humanitarian access. Market monitoring is particularly important for Southern African maize, West African rice imports and Yemen's wheat exposure.

Floods, public health and water resources

The strongest seasonal flood concern remains East Africa during OND. Flood impacts depend on rainfall intensity, upstream catchments, soil saturation, river levels and exposure. Elsewhere, Southern Africa, Central America, northern South America and parts of Asia require close monitoring of reservoirs, groundwater, soil moisture and drinking-water availability.

Priority country and regional watchlist

The watchlist highlights areas where current conditions, seasonal timing and forecast signals justify enhanced monitoring and preparedness; it does not imply that impacts or anticipatory action triggers are certain.

Timeframe	Priority countries / regions	Main issue to monitor	Operational focus
Now– December 2026	Somalia – Juba/Shabelle	Riverine/flash flooding, WASH, disease	Track upstream rainfall, river gauges, breaches and high-risk water points.
Now-December 2026	Kenya, S/SE Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi	Enhanced rainfall, floods, landslides	Use national/sub-seasonal forecasts, soil saturation and river levels for local readiness.
Now-Early 2027	Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Karamoja	Drought legacy, harvest and pasture stress	Monitor harvests, food prices, pasture and household stocks.

October 2026-March 2027	Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, S Zambia, S Angola, Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia, S Madagascar	Delayed onset, dry spells, heat	Track onset, planting, soil moisture, water and agricultural labour.
October-December	Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Haiti	Drought, heat, crop/water stress	Track rainfall, soil moisture, crop stages and household water.
October-February	N Colombia, Venezuela, Guianas, Amazon	Rainfall deficits, heat, wildfire/water stress	Monitor rivers, soil moisture, wildfire risk and rainfed agriculture.
Now-Early 2027	Pakistan	Kharif losses; rabi transition	Monitor production, labour, irrigation and rabi recovery.
October-January	Southeast Asia / Maritime Continent	Dryness, crop stress, reservoirs, wildfire	Track rainfall, water storage, rice and fire indicators.
2026/2027 Market Period	Southern Africa, West Africa, Yemen	Maize, rice and wheat market exposure	Strengthen regional price, trade and import monitoring.

Operational recommendations for Humanitarian Preparedness, DRR, and AHA

1. Maintain a dual-risk approach in East Africa: continue drought-impact monitoring while accelerating flood preparedness in the eastern Horn.
2. Prioritise hydrological information in Somalia, including upstream rainfall, river gauges, breach locations, flood extent and FAO-SWALIM information.
3. Move Southern Africa fully into crop-establishment preparedness, tracking onset, planting, soil moisture, water availability and heat.
4. Maintain drought and water-stress monitoring across Central America and northern South America, where dry signals remain consistent.
5. Separate past kharif impacts from future rabi prospects in South Asia; monitor whether wetter conditions support recovery.
6. Strengthen market monitoring alongside climate monitoring, especially Southern African maize, West African rice and Yemen wheat exposure.
7. Do not use ENSO or IOD as stand-alone triggers; combine seasonal outlooks with national/sub-seasonal forecasts, hydrology, observed impacts and hazard-specific thresholds.

Suggested communication wording

The 2026/27 El Niño has reached very strong intensity and is expected to remain very strong through late 2026. Impacts are increasingly differentiated: drought and heat have affected parts of East and West Africa, Central America, Pakistan and Southeast Asia, while October–December forecasts strongly favour wetter conditions across much of the Greater Horn and drier conditions across Southern Africa, Central America, the Maritime Continent and northern tropical South America.

A positive IOD is expected to reinforce some regional patterns during the final months of 2026. Seasonal outlooks indicate increased risk rather than certainty; humanitarian preparedness should combine them with national and sub-national forecasts, hydrological conditions, observed impacts and hazard-specific triggers.

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Muhammad Fawwad
Expert Scientific Forecasting, Risk and Hazard Modelling
Welthungerhilfe Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Facility (WAHAFA)
wahafa@welthungerhilfe.de
www.linkedin.com/showcase/anticipatory-action-whh