Special Report
El Niño 2026–2027 Sense-Making Session Brief

16 November 2026

Background

The El Niño 2026–2027 'sense-making' session on October 28th, 2026, brought together experts from the IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC), Climate Hazards Center/Famine Early Warning Systems Network (CHC/FEWS NET), International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI), and the United Kingdom Met Office (UK Met Office) to review the evolving El Niño event and its implications for Eastern Africa.

Given that by end of October many bimodal rainfall areas across the region had not yet experienced the widespread heavy rainfall and flooding that earlier forecasts had indicated, an important question emerged: Does the relatively subdued start to the season indicate that the forecasts were incorrect, or is the season still evolving in a manner consistent with expectations for a strong El Niño event? The session sought to address this question by examining recent observations, reviewing the latest forecasts, and assessing how previous El Niño events evolved during the October-December season. Each institution presented its assessment of current conditions, the likely evolution of the season, and the associated implications for the region. The presentations were followed by a discussion with participants to identify areas of consensus, key uncertainties, and priorities for preparedness and early action.

One of the key recommendations was to monitor updated forecasts and observations, due to the early October timing of the predictions discussed on the 28th October 2026 and the value added by forecasts from early November. Early November analyses also support evaluation of rains for all of October. This report provides a timely early-mid season assessment based on and prompted by the El Niño 2026-2027 sense-making session, including the updated observation and forecast information at hand, as of November 11th.

Current Situation and Progression

The session highlighted convergence that the OND season started unevenly across Eastern Africa. Wetter-than-normal conditions were observed in much of Somalia, eastern and southeastern Ethiopia, parts of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and parts of South Sudan. In contrast, drier conditions persisted in parts of western and central Ethiopia, parts of central, eastern and northern Kenya, most parts of South Sudan, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea. Eastern Ethiopia, localized areas of southeastern and southwestern Kenya, and

much of Somalia experienced an early onset of rains, while remaining parts of the region experienced delayed onset. October forecasts indicated progressive establishment of rains across delayed areas during late October and November, in line with the typical progression of the seasonal rains, with peak rainfall expected during November. Figure 1 presents an analysis of time-specific October and December rainfall patterns from the strong El Niño years of 1997, 2015, and 2023. It shows that the uneven early-mid October rainfall was not atypical. Previous El Niño events also exhibited a variable and sometimes delayed start to the OND season before wetter conditions became more established later in the season. However, as in 2015, not all El Niños produce highly abnormal rainfall. The comparison suggests that the relatively subdued conditions observed by the end of October 2026 were broadly consistent with historical El Niño evolution, but with a tilt towards more normal rainfall, as in El Niño seasons such as 2015.

October forecasts from the participating institutions converged and indicated an increased likelihood of above-normal rainfall across much of the eastern equatorial sector during the remainder of the season (See e.g. Figure 2 left). Model guidance further showed increasing atmospheric convergence across parts of Eastern Africa, suggesting conditions conducive to enhanced rainfall activity in the coming weeks. Consequently, the session highlighted that continued monitoring of sub-seasonal forecasts and emerging rainfall patterns would remain critical for preparedness and early action planning.

More recent model forecasts are indicating several important characteristics to watch for during the 2026 season. An early ensemble of seasonal climate model forecasts from early November depicts a much less optimistic wet outlook from climate models for the NDJ period (e.g. Figure 2 right). This is consistent with ongoing mixed conditions. The update is broadly similar to the indications from various weekly to subseasonal forecasts. These indicate average to below-average rains during coming weeks in Somalia and southeastern Ethiopia, and a reduction in chances of above-normal NDJ rainfall, compared to October model forecasts. Going forward, localized very heavy rains and flooding are considered to remain a risk in the region, and such rains could also result in above-normal seasonal outcomes. During November 10th to 16th, above-normal rains are forecast in western and southern parts of the region, with high rainfall amounts possible in western, central, and southern Kenya, and parts of western Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. The update highlights that above-normal November rains are unlikely region-wide and that mixed regional conditions should be monitored.

Collectively, the information suggests that the delayed onset observed in some areas does not necessarily indicate a poor season overall but rather reflects the variable and evolving nature of rainfall during strong El Niño events as well as issues potentially related to the timing of uneven rainfall in parts of the region.

Funded by European Union Humanitarian Aid
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IGAD ICPAC
Climate Hazards Center UC SANTA BARBARA
FEWS NET Famine Early Warning Systems Network
IRI
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SWALIM
unicef for every child
WFP World Food Programme
IPC
Met Office

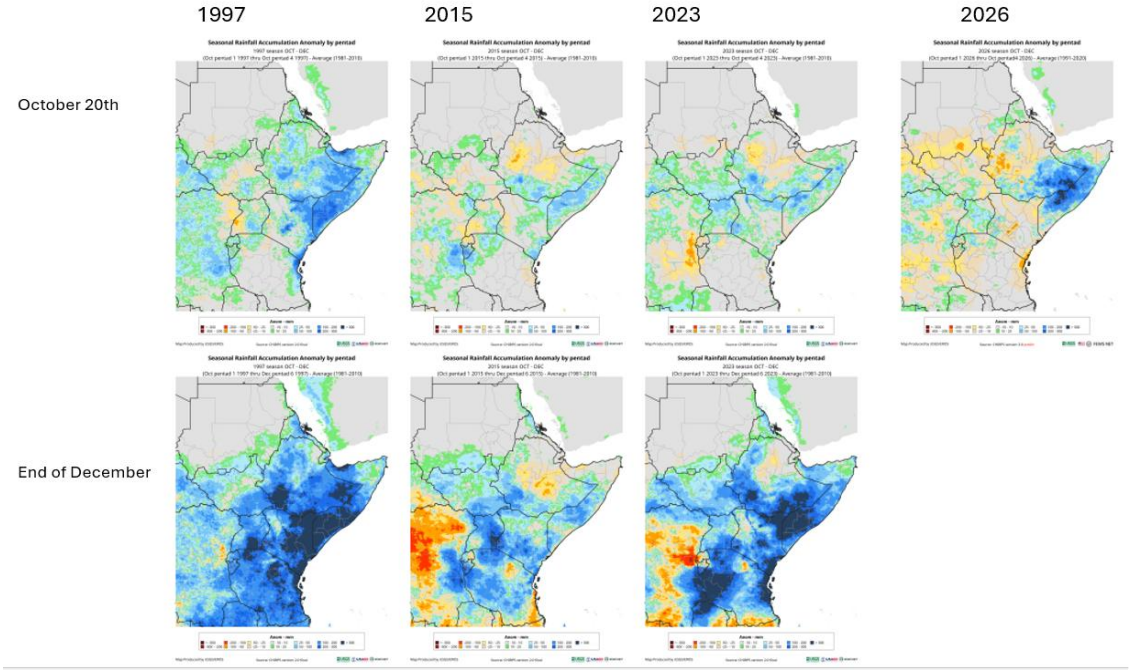
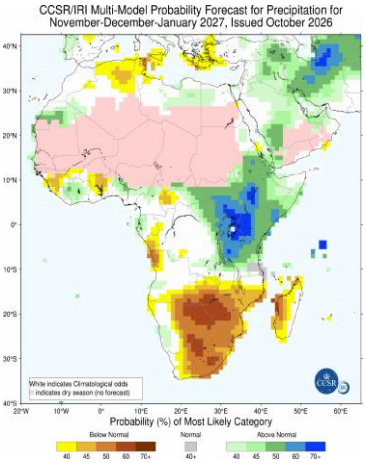
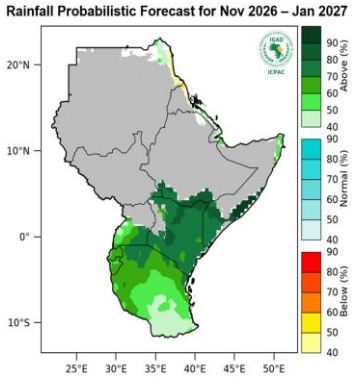


Figure 1: Comparison of rainfall in the months of October and December in past El Niño events in the region

IRI/CCSR November-January Outlook



ICPAC NDJ 2026-27 Outlook (November)



UCSB CHC NDJ 2026-27 (November)

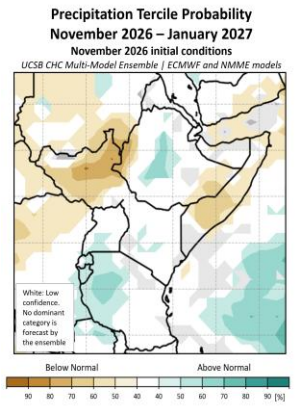


Figure 2: Forecasted rainfall performance in November 2026 to January 2027 (NDJ), also highlighting the change in model outlooks from October to November 2026. The CCSR/IRI (left) image show multi-model ensemble NDJ forecasts from early October, and the ICPAC (middle) and UCSB CHC (right) image shows a multi-model ensemble NDJ forecast from early November.

Funded by European Union Humanitarian Aid
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IGAD ICPAC
Climate Hazards Center UC SANTA BARBARA
FEWS NET Famine Early Warning Systems Network
IRI
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SWALIM
unicef for every child
WFP World Food Programme
IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
Met Office

Summary, Key messages and Implications

The 'sense-making' session highlighted a strong degree of consensus among participating meteorological institutions regarding the status of the season, the expected evolution of rainfall conditions, and the key risks that may emerge during the remainder of the OND season. While localized differences in rainfall performance and impacts are expected, participants generally agreed that the season is evolving in line with expectations for a drier El Niño event, similar to 2015.

During 2026, mixed rainfall conditions have continued during late October through early November. The updated (from early November) seasonal and subseasonal forecasts support this outlook. Likely characteristics include uneven rainfall distribution in southeastern Ethiopia and Somalia, due to early and abnormally wet conditions followed by below-average late October to November rains, potential rainfall deficits in South Sudan, and a possible concentration of above-normal November rains across much of Kenya, southern Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania.

It was also emphasized that seasonal rainfall outcomes are influenced not only by El Niño but also by other climate drivers, including the currently positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) and shorter-term atmospheric processes such as the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO), which can affect the timing, intensity, and distribution of rainfall over periods of days to weeks. The Table 1 below summarizes the key messages from the session and outlines their implications for preparedness, early action, and ongoing monitoring by FSNWG members and partners.

Table 1: Key messages and implications

Issue	Key Message	Implications for Partners
Current status	Early onset of seasonal rains has been observed in Somalia and eastern Ethiopia, while several bimodal areas experienced a delayed onset. Rainfall has generally been less intense than anticipated through the end of the first week of November.	Continue monitoring rainfall establishment and seasonal progression, particularly in areas with delayed onset.
Expected evolution	The OND outlook has tilted towards more normal outcomes. Most institutions agree that above-normal rainfall remains a likely outcome across much of Eastern Africa. Short term forecasts indicate above-average rainfall in Kenya, Tanzania and parts of Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi and these conditions are likely to persist over the coming week.	Maintain preparedness plans and continue using updated forecasts to guide decision-making.
Timing	Rainfall is expected to intensify during November, with wet conditions likely to persist through December across many bimodal rainfall areas. However, localized rainfall deficits may persist during November in various parts of the regions, where below-average rainfall has been observed in recent weeks.	Closely monitor for heavy rainfall events and potential flood triggers during November and December.

Funded by European Union Humanitarian Aid
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IGAD ICPAC
Climate Hazards Center UC SANTA BARBARA
FEWS NET Famine Early Warning Systems Network
IRI
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SWALIM
unicef for every child
WFP World Food Programme
IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
Met Office

Geographical risk	Flood risk remains elevated in parts of Somalia, eastern Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Kenya. Rainfall deficits may persist in western Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea. While some crop growing areas in southern Somalia received abundant early season rains, poor November outcomes are predicted by sub-seasonal models. These deficits combined with a very short growing season could impact yields for non-irrigated crops.	Tailor preparedness and response actions to local conditions, recognizing that risks vary across the region.
Uncertainty	Uncertainty remains regarding the timing, intensity, and location of heavy rainfall events, flooding, and localized dry spells.	Regularly review weekly and monthly forecasts and adjust preparedness plans as conditions evolve.
Anticipatory action	Strengthen flood preparedness, disseminate climate and agricultural advisories, enhance disease surveillance, and protect critical infrastructure and livelihoods.	Act early to reduce losses and protect vulnerable populations, livelihoods, and assets.
Follow-up	Continue monitoring forecasts, rainfall performance, and emerging hotspots for flooding or moisture stress. Provide regular updates to partners and stakeholders.	Ensure ongoing information sharing and coordination to support timely preparedness and response actions.

Funded by European Union Humanitarian Aid
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IGAD ICPAC
Climate Hazards Center UC SANTA BARBARA
FEWS NET Famine Early Warning Systems Network
IRI
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SWALIM
unicef for every child
WFP World Food Programme
IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
Met Office