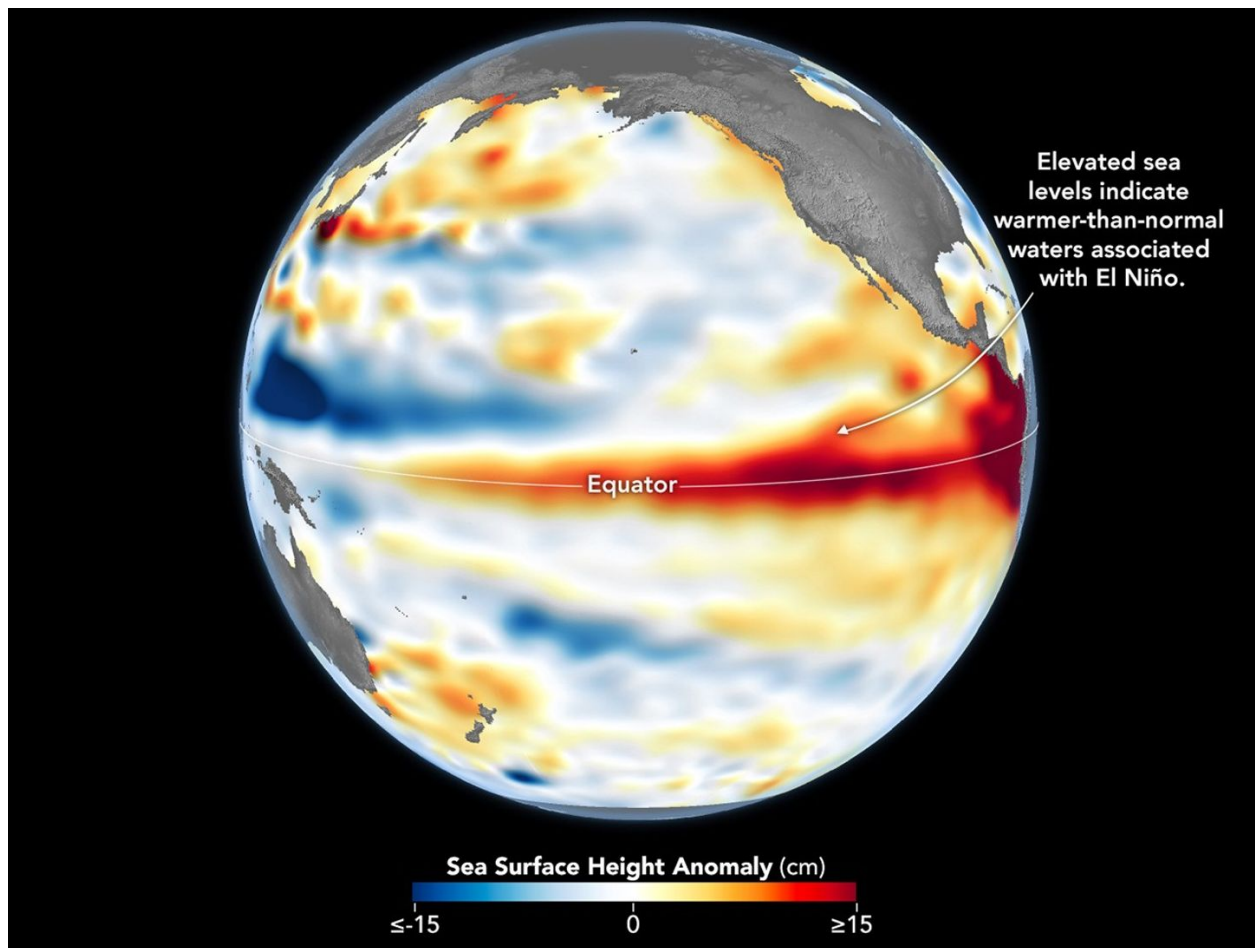


Policy Brief August 3, 2026

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Before the Harvest Falls: Keeping El Niño a Weather Event, Not a Global Crisis



Photograph: NASA Image of the Day, June 2026

The El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), or El Niño, is a weather pattern that occurs every two to seven years and makes some parts of the world drier while making others wetter. This year’s El Niño is predicted to have especially large impacts. As a result, this fall’s iteration of the weather pattern has earned the colloquial title of the “Super El Niño”. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced on June 11th that the event is projected to cause a 63% increase in surface sea level temperatures exceeding 2.0°C, a threshold that would classify it as a “very strong” El Niño.

This year's El Niño is expected to upend some of the world's most important seafood-producing sectors and heavily impact the livelihood of local Pacific communities because of droughts, cyclones, floods, extreme heat, and more.¹

The June 11th announcement is a clear warning to take immediate action. An El Niño of similar magnitude to this year's projections occurred in 1997 and 1998. If this year's El Niño is even remotely as catastrophic as its thirty-year-old predecessor, worldwide losses can be expected to total around \$686 billion. If local and national policymakers fail to take immediate action, this number can surpass \$3.1 trillion over the next five years.²

This policy brief offers recommendations based on models and predictions of the impacts of one of the largest El Niños in history. NOAA's latest outlook gives an 81% probability that this year's El Niño will reach peak intensity from October to December this year.³ Given this high percentage, governments and international institutions ought to take action before the El Niño becomes highly destructive. Policy should focus on protecting the vulnerable, preventing temporary agricultural shocks from becoming food crises, and safeguarding the fiscal and economic stability of middle- and low-income countries.

¹ Sarah Parsons, World Resources Institute, How Might a 'Super El Niño' Affect Food, Forests and Water? (2026, June 3), <https://www.wri.org/insights/super-el-niño-impacts-explained>.

² Cullen S. Hendrix, Peterson Institute for International Economics, El Niño could drag down the global economy by almost \$700 billion or \$3 trillion—and the choice is ours (2025, July 20), <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2026/el-niño-could-drag-down-global-economy-almost-700-billion-or-3>.

³ Siddarth S and Johann M Cherian, Reuters, Emerging markets stare at inflation risks as powerful El Niño looms (July 26, 2026), <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/emerging-markets-stare-inflation-risks-powerful-el-nio-looms-2026-07-27/>.



Photograph: The European Central Bank estimates a super El Niño will drive food commodity prices, most significantly impacting soya beans: Bloomberg/Getty Images

El Niño is a Shock Multiplier

This year's El Niño is particularly concerning given high global temperatures resulting from climate change.⁴ The World Resources Institute warns that climate change will amplify the already drastic effects of El Niño as communities are already experiencing warmer, drier, and more erratic conditions.⁵

⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations , El Niño (2026), <https://www.fao.org/el-Niño/en>.

⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization for the United Nations, El Niño in a hotter world: what it means for food systems (2026), <https://www.fao.org/climate-change/thematic-areas/el-ni%C3%B1o-in-a-hotter-world--what-it-means-for-food-s-ytems>.

As a result, the El Niño's impacts will vary across geographic locations. Some countries will get lucky with helpful rainfall, while others will face extreme drought, flooding, wildfires, and more.⁶

We saw El Niño's intense humanitarian consequences from 2015 to 2026, when the World Health Organization estimated that more than 60 million people were affected by the weather pattern.⁷ Drought, flooding, heat, and food insecurity led to high levels of malnutrition, heat stress, infectious disease, and respiratory illness.

The 2026 El Niño has the potential to trigger a particularly severe food price shock. Analysts predict that major commodities will see price increases of 10-50%, while highly exposed crops such as rice, palm oil, sugarcane, and coffee could potentially experience price increases of 50-100% or more.⁸

⁶ Seth Borenstein and Edith M. Lederer, AP News, UN, scientists warn that strong El Nino will add fuel to 'a planet already on fire'(July 31, 2026),

<https://apnews.com/article/el-nino-climate-change-warming-drought-un-554b976f05faoa5583ab73c9d57467ff>.

⁷ World Health Organizations, EL NIÑO AND HEALTH - UPDATE (2016),

https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/climate-change/flyer_26april2016.pdf?sfvrsn=98576ff1_4&

⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization for the United Nations, El Niño is coming. Here is where the risks to agriculture are highest(2026),

<https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/el-nino-is-coming-here-is-where-the-risks-to-agriculture-are-highest/en>



Photograph: A firefighter moves beehives away from flames while battling a wildfire in San Martin de Valdeiglesias, west of Madrid, Spain, July 26, 2026. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez, File)

Who is Disproportionately Affected: Micro and Macro

The first and most vulnerable group to consider is smallholder farmers and agricultural workers in developing countries. Subsistence farmers not only face the risk of a failed harvest causing lost income, but also face the risk of losing their household's food supply and ability to purchase others' food.⁹ Climate shocks in and of themselves can trap farmers in poverty.¹⁰ India, being reliant on its monsoon rainfall, serves as an example of this.¹¹ Current forecasts suggest that this year could give a drier monsoon since El Niño is historically associated with weaker monsoons, thus threatening agricultural production and increasing food inflation. Indonesia, the

⁹ Climate change and agriculture: Strengthening the role of smallholders, Title of Report (2016), <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/450264>.

¹⁰ International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Family Farming Knowledge Platform (2014), <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/409382>.

¹¹ Rajendra Jadhav, Reuters, India forecasts below-average August monsoon rainfall (July 31, 2026), <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/india-forecasts-below-average-august-monsoon-rainfall-2026-07-31>.

Philippines, Vietnam, Kenya, and South Africa are all among emerging economies facing food inflation pressures from El Niño.¹²¹³

Food price shocks disproportionately impact impoverished households who must spend a larger share of their income on necessities. A poor household does not get the privilege of being able to eliminate discretionary spending. It is forced to eliminate vital spending on education, food, or even medical care. By threatening an agricultural shock, El Niño threatens a nutrition crisis for the most vulnerable.

The final and most important factor to consider when creating policy surrounding El Niño is unequal fiscal capacity. Developed countries are typically able to provide adequate solutions to disasters without catastrophic disruption to their economies. This does not ring true for developing countries with much less fiscal wiggle-room. The World Bank finds that developing countries make up more than 10 percent of global economic disaster losses while simultaneously making up only about 1 percent of global GDP. Historically, we can look at the 1997–98 El Niño. The United States was estimated to have lost 0.03 percent of its GDP, while Ecuador was estimated to have lost 14.6 percent of its GDP. This is not an isolated blow to Ecuador's economy, however, it is a complex accumulation of events that erodes a country's ability for future growth. Because of El Niño's aforementioned effects on agriculture, food import prices go up and divert investment from foreign countries. The elevated disease burden diverts productivity and focuses resources on reactionary treatments rather than growth and investment.¹⁴

¹² World Food Programme, Impacts of the Ongoing Energy Crisis and the Forecasted El Niño to the Philippines (May 20, 2026), <http://wfp.org/publications/impacts-ongoing-energy-crisis-and-forecasted-el-nino-philippines>.

¹³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO emergencies and resilience (2026), <https://www.fao.org/emergencies/appeals/global-appeal/en>.

¹⁴ NASA Goddard, Youtube, How the 2015–2016 El Niño Triggered Outbreaks Across the Globe (February 28, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMJjAxtX4ZQ>.



UN Photo/Tobin Jones A man rests his bag of rice distributed by the Qatar Charity for internally displaced people affected by climate events in Jowhar, Somalia(2013)

Recommendations

- The first policy should be an internationally coordinated El Niño early action fund. It has been found that with respect to climate-related disasters, countries tend to face widening sovereign spreads when they need to borrow and maintain investment in social spending.¹⁵¹⁶ Coordinated policy can be enforced by organizations such as the World Bank, regional development banks, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Funding should be automatically available to affected countries when a climate disaster surpasses a set threshold for drought, rainfall, heat, crop failure, or food prices. The money should be used to finance evacuation and emergency shelters, clean-water systems, emergency medical supplies, heat-response centers, flood-control measures, emergency cash transfers, mosquito and infectious-disease prevention, pre-positioning of

¹⁵ John Beirne, Nuobu Renzhi, Ulrich Volz, Science Direct, Feeling the heat: Climate risks and the cost of sovereign borrowing(November 2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1059056021001659>.

¹⁶ Valencia Arana, Oscar Mauricio, Jose E. Gomez-Gonzalez, Jorge M. Uribe, IDB, How Developing Countries Reduce the Impact of Climate Vulnerability on Sovereign Risk (January 21, 2025), <https://www.iadb.org/en/blog/modernization-state/fiscal-management/how-developing-countries-reduce-impact-climate-vulnerability-sovereign-risk>.

food and medicine, and temporary employment programs.¹⁷ A policy such as this is supported by decades of evidence including a UN assessment after the 1997–98 El Niño which concluded that improved forecasting and preparedness could substantially reduce recurring human and economic losses and recommended institutions capable of coordinating preemptive responses and readiness.¹⁸

- The other desperately needed policy is a global food shock reserve. El Niño driven agricultural shocks create changes in food prices that are foreseeable and to a certain extent, preventable. The World Food Program has had its funding decked in recent years as a result of energy crunches and a push for rearmament in North Asian, North American, and European advanced economies.¹⁹ There is now a pressing need for capital. The international community should establish a temporary reserve of staple grains, particularly rice, maize, and wheat in the regions identified to be most vulnerable to climate disasters. The international community should also discourage emergency export bans on staple crops. When countries simultaneously ban exports to protect their domestic supplies, a global shortage can arise. Instead, countries ought to coordinate temporary trade agreements guaranteeing minimum export volumes to food-importing nations.

The international community possesses a tool it did not always have: advance warning. With this knowledge and our predictions, humanitarian aid preparation needs to begin before El Niño's narrow policy window closes. Our forecast gives governments the opportunity to purchase grain before prices surge, move emergency goods before roads are no longer passable, provide vulnerable farmers with the tools and resources they need before the season, strengthen climate disaster defenses, and provide financing to developing countries their fiscal positions deteriorate. We have the unique opportunity to prevent El Niño from turning into a disastrous and prolonged development setback.

¹⁷ Author/Agency, Disaster Risk Financing and Insurance (DRFI) Program (Year), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/disaster-risk-financing-and-insurance-program>.

¹⁸ World Food Programme, Anticipatory Action for climate shocks, <https://www.wfp.org/anticipatory-actions>.

¹⁹ Cullen S. Hendrix, Peterson Institute for International Economics, As US food aid retreats, can BRICS+ and biotechnology fill the world's food security gap? (January 2026), <https://www.piie.com/publications/policy-briefs/2026/us-food-aid-retreats-can-brics-and-biotechnology-fill-worlds-food>.