

WAYS TO BRACE FOR A SUPER EL NIÑO

INTO today's polycrisis of wars and oil shocks, the World Meteorological Organization has dropped a climate bombshell: there is an 80 percent chance a significant El Niño will take hold by mid-2026, with odds rising above 90 percent that it will persist well into winter. A few models go further, flagging a possible 'super' event—Pacific waters warming more than 2°C beyond normal. That has not happened since 2015-16.

For most countries, this would be a headline. For India, it is a livelihood emergency in waiting. Roughly 42 percent of India's workforce earns their bread from farming, and the southwest monsoon accounts for 70 percent of the rain the country receives. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has already lowered its seasonal rainfall estimate twice. The probability of El Niño conditions prevailing through the June-September season now stands at 92 percent, with the phenomenon expected to gather muscle as the months go by.

Walk into any rain-dependent village in Vidarbha or Kalahandi and ask what a 70-mm shortfall in rainfall means. It means the kharif sowing gets delayed, then gambled upon, then sometimes abandoned. It means a family already spending half its income on food watches prices climb. It means the moneylender's ledger grows thicker.

The physics behind the damage is straightforward, even if the consequences are not. El Niño warms the central Pacific, which in turn scrambles a vast atmospheric loop called the Walker Circulation. Normally, this loop helps pull moisture westward toward Asia. During an El Niño, it weakens. High pressure settles over the subcontinent, the humid updrafts that power the monsoon lose energy and rain-bearing systems thin out or stall.

Meanwhile, the polycrisis means costlier diesel, costlier fertiliser and costlier transport—three expenses a small farmer cannot avoid. If poor rains push up grain and vegetable prices at the same time that imported energy is stoking broader inflation, the squeeze falls hardest on those who can bear it least.

India is not alone in this predicament. Indonesia's rice belt faces eerily similar risks every time the Pacific warms. What Jakarta has done differently is invested in making climate science legible to the people who need it most. Through a programme called Climate Field Schools—run jointly by its mete-

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orological agency and agriculture ministry—Indonesian farmers learn to read seasonal forecasts and adjust their planting calendars before the drought bites.

When a UN team reviewed the programme after the 2023 El Niño, they found it had tangibly softened the blow in the country's most exposed communities. Indonesia has also rolled out a water-saving rice cultivation technique known as alternate wetting and drying, which trims irrigation needs by a fifth without hurting yields.



A strong El Niño can take a big bite out of India's farm output this year. We should learn from Indonesia, where farmers read seasonal forecasts to adjust planting calendars. Peru treats El Niño as a national economic emergency rather than a weather event

South America tells a complementary story. Peru, sitting right on the Pacific's doorstep, has long treated El Niño as a national economic emergency. Its multi-sector Estudio Nacional del Fenómeno El Niño (ENFEN) commission brings meteorologists, agronomists, fisheries experts and finance officials around the same table. In 2023, that body sounded the alarm early enough for the anchovy fleet to be pulled off the water before stocks collapsed, and for coastal farmers to switch to heat-tolerant crop varieties ahead of the season.

Across Latin America more broadly, governments are now building regional platforms that link climate forecasts directly to fertiliser supply chains, crop insurance products and emergency logistics. The les-

son from both hemispheres is clear: resilience works when it escapes the meteorological silo and becomes everybody's job.

To be fair, India has not been sitting idle. In May 2026, the IMD unveiled an AI-driven monsoon forecasting system that can predict onset at the block level a full month in advance—a leap from the week-ahead alerts of a decade ago. A pilot in Uttar Pradesh now generates rainfall predictions at one-kilometre resolution.

Mission Mausam, a ₹2,000-crore push, fuses conventional weather models with machine-learning networks that can read monsoon patterns up to 18 days out. The AgriStack initiative has enrolled over 8.4 crore farmers into a digital identity system linked to land records, crops and entitlements, and a geospatial decision-support platform now overlays soil health, water availability and weather data on one screen.

Impressive on paper. But the test of any tool is whether it changes things for the person standing in a field with no smartphone signal and no English. Five things need to happen fast. One, AI forecasts must reach smallholders in their own language, through village networks they already trust. Two, borrowing from Indonesia's AWD playbook, water management in rain-deficit districts needs to move from pilot to standard practice—micro-irrigation, watershed restoration, smarter use of groundwater. Three, crop insurance should follow the Latin American direction: parametric products that pay out automatically when a satellite detects low rainfall, no paperwork, no waiting. Four, ICAR's drought-tolerant seed varieties must be in farmers' hands before—not after—the sowing window. And five, taking a cue from Peru's ENFEN, climate risk needs a permanent seat at the macroeconomic table.

The monsoon will almost certainly disappoint; the only uncertainty is by how much. What remains open is whether the woman tending a two-acre plot in Bundelkhand and the landless labourer waiting for harvest work in Kalahandi will experience this El Niño any differently than their parents experienced 2009.

(Views are personal)

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