



Integrating ‘anticipatory action’ in disaster risk management

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Key messages

- ‘Anticipatory action’ (AA) is not a new endeavour or sector, but should be seen as an integral component of disaster risk management, adaptation and resilience. This will require a better understanding of how AA relates to existing government structures, policies and programmes.
- A frank discussion is needed between governments and international aid agencies on the utility of AA; the specific problems that it can help overcome; and where other types of external support would be more effective.
- AA will not reduce disaster impacts in the long run without steps to address the power structures and rent-seeking practices blocking progress on reducing risks.
- Critically, AA should not be a substitute for investment and action to reduce vulnerability and strengthen people’s capacity to manage risks – it should not crowd out public investment in adaptation, risk reduction and preparedness.

Introduction

‘Anticipatory action’ (AA), as it is now referred to, encompasses a set of planned and pre-financed measures taken when a disaster is imminent, prior to a shock or before acute impacts are felt.¹ Increasing support for AA is born of frustration with late responses to drought and other hazards, despite considerable progress in forecasting techniques, and in particular in the accuracy of forecasts of extreme weather (Wilkinson et al., 2018). Sophisticated early warning systems present a significant opportunity to avert food crises, yet these warnings and forecasts often go unheeded by humanitarian agencies and donors alike (Bailey, 2012). Using this information to help prevent or mitigate potential future impacts makes intuitive sense, and humanitarian agencies have a moral obligation to act early if a crisis is foreseen.

This paper argues that actions taken when a disaster is imminent should not be a substitute for longer-term investment and action to reduce vulnerability and should strengthen people’s capacity to manage risks effectively and adapt to climate change. Agencies have argued that these instruments should be used to reduce vulnerability and strengthen livelihoods, but these structural problems are better addressed through disaster risk management (DRM), climate resilience and adaptation frameworks. Rather, AA initiatives are best employed to manage residual risks – that is, risks that individuals or governments are unwilling or unable to tackle through other longer-term measures.

We recommend more attention be paid to considering how AA initiatives fit within the wider disaster risk management and adaptation financing landscape. In particular, AA initiatives should aim to address the political, economic and institutional factors limiting all preventive action: specifically, the tendency for governments to use public finance for more visible ex-post emergency response, rather than less definitive ex-ante measures to reduce risk, which are harder to understand and whose impacts are harder to measure (Wilkinson, 2012).

Scaling up anticipatory action: the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership

Launched at the UN Secretary-General’s Climate Action Summit on 23 September 2019, the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) commits international humanitarian and development agencies and government signatories to stepping up efforts and financial support to early action by 2025 (DFID, 2019; see Box 1).

What started out as a few pilot initiatives implemented by humanitarian agencies in a small number of rural communities is now developing into a community of practice. The ambition is to scale up AA financing and coverage, and drive a systemic shift towards anticipatory action, including through engagement with national risk management systems. Success will depend

Box 1 REAP targets for 2025

1. Fifty countries will have reviewed and integrated their crisis/disaster risk management and climate adaptation laws, policies and plans to ensure that they reduce climate change impacts and the exposure of people and the environment.
2. A billion more people will be covered by financing and delivery mechanisms connected to early action plans, ensuring they can act ahead of disasters and crises.
3. \$500 million will be invested in early warning system infrastructure and institutions to target early action, building on existing initiatives such as DFID’s WISER, ARRCC and CREWS programmes.
4. A billion more people will be covered by new or improved early warning systems, including heatwave early warning, connected to longer-term risk management systems and supported by public awareness campaigns.

Source: DFID (2019)

¹ These initiatives are also commonly referred to as forecast-based early action (FbA), forecast-based financing (FbF) and early warning early action (EWEA).

on whether AA interventions can trigger the use of development funds for timelier action (whether forecast-based or not) across a range of timescales, and whether they can help overcome the constraints on ex-ante disaster risk financing (see next section).

There will need to be a clear logic for using development resources in a specific timeframe when a crisis is probable, in addition to using them to reduce vulnerability (whether those investments are from state resources, development aid, DRM budgets or international climate or resilience funds). The use of humanitarian funds for AA is justified if deploying these resources earlier can have a substantially greater impact on reducing human suffering before a disaster. From a national perspective, a range of interventions, over various timescales, can be used to manage risk and mitigate hazard impacts, but these have to be weighed against other development needs in public investment decisions. The justification for allocating resources to risk reduction and adaptation therefore rests on their effectiveness, not only in reducing impacts when a disaster occurs in the future, but also on generating other resilience dividends (see Tanner and Wilkinson, 2016).

The political economy of early action

AA initiatives will be beneficial to national disaster agencies and their partners if they explicitly address the political economy constraints that limit long-term planning and the use of public funds to manage risk before a disaster occurs. These constraints vary across countries and contexts, but three issues deserve special attention: myopia; public opinion and voting behaviour; and rent-seeking (Wilkinson, 2012; Tanner and Wilkinson, 2016):

- Governments tend to act in short-sighted ways (Kahneman and Lovallo, 1993; Thaler et al., 1997), preferring present over future benefits. As a result, people and governments under-invest in preparedness for future disasters.
- Politicians choose to prepare less than they think may be necessary because they expect they will not get adequately rewarded for such foresight at the ballot box (Depoorter, 2006). Conversely, an effective response post-disaster can be a vote-winner.

- Rent-seeking refers to governments steering public resources into private hands. In the context of DRM, this involves using disaster funds for personal gain (Lewis and Kelman, 2012).

In the Eastern Caribbean, one recent study demonstrates that, even when governments plan for disasters – specifying what actions will be taken when alerts are issued 72 hours before a tropical cyclone – insufficient funds are earmarked for ex-ante action generally (including early action). High levels of debt and scarce funds mean that governments are reluctant to commit what funds they do have to prepare for an event that might not happen (Wilkinson et al., forthcoming). This is particularly the case with rapid-onset events such as hurricanes, where the location and extent of impacts is hard to predict accurately.

In Bangladesh, decision-making at national and local levels is often based on relationships of political patronage, and disaster finance is skewed towards relief (Tanner et al., 2019). If national funding was made available for AA, it might come under political pressure. But mechanisms could be put in place to make the targeting and delivery of aid more transparent, equitable and needs-based. One example are social assistance schemes such as the Hunger Safety Net Programme, which has clear criteria for targeting poor households in Northern Kenya to deliver emergency support during droughts. Similar pre-established mechanisms could be used to deliver AA where adequate information on vulnerability and exposure is available and incorporated into the targeting process.

In this context, external agencies can help to ‘de-risk’ early action, providing reliable finance that can be released quickly when a hazard is forecast to pay for actions that would not otherwise be taken (like mass evacuations), allowing national agencies to focus on longer-term planning and investment to reduce risk. Development agencies can also help in developing and updating national risk assessments and assessing post-disaster loss and damage. This information is critical to impact-based forecasting, where the potential impacts of hazards can be quickly assessed and pre-disaster aid targeted accordingly, but it can

also be used to encourage pre-disaster planning and investment by helping governments to model and calculate the costs and benefits of different actions to reduce disaster impacts.

Revisiting the logic of anticipatory action

AA interventions need an explicit theory of change (ToC) to consolidate approaches among practitioners as to how different AA mechanisms can be used to avoid human suffering alongside other types of support. This also entails generating a better understanding among all stakeholders of how AA relates to existing government structures, policies and programmes, for instance in the fields of climate change adaptation, DRM, social protection and disaster risk financing.

A frank discussion between governments, donors and international aid agencies is needed as to the specific problems that AA can help with, and where other types of external support – financial and otherwise – would be more effective in achieving the same goal. The starting point should be a deep understanding of disaster impacts, the types of collective action that can help reduce these impacts for the most vulnerable (including AA), and why this action is not currently taking place, or not sufficiently. As one participant noted at a recent roundtable event on the future of FbA: ‘Donors and practitioners need to know which activities are routinely excluded from/included in funding so that they can investigate where and whether they could fill gaps’ (ODI, 2019).

Theories of change describe the logical sequence of an initiative from inputs to outcomes to goals. They are produced through a process of reflection and dialogue among stakeholders, through which ideas about change are discussed alongside underlying assumptions of how and why change might happen as an outcome of different initiatives (Vogel, 2012). A first step is to develop a thorough understanding of disaster impacts and how they materialise, then work backwards to identify the risk management measures that can help reduce these impacts. For AA in particular, such an approach is recommended by the German Red Cross and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre’s

FbF manual as part of the process to formulate, prioritise, monitor and evaluate early actions (Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre, 2017).

A critical next step is for external proponents of AA to consider if and how they can work with national and local governments and local civil society organisations. Do they have similar aims (to avoid hazards becoming disasters and to reduce human suffering), in which case they should be strengthening existing DRM systems and helping overcome constraints to managing risk? Or are they contradictory, in which case a parallel system or mechanism may be justified? How can external agencies help shift power structures and rent-seeking practices, and what role can humanitarian actors play in this? All these questions need to be answered before AA can be scaled up nationally.

Critically, AA should not be a substitute for investment and action to reduce vulnerability and strengthen people’s capacity to manage risks effectively – it should not crowd out public investment in adaptation, risk reduction and preparedness. Only where risks have not or cannot be effectively reduced should AA play a role. Unfortunately, these residual risks are often substantial because governments are unwilling or unable to prioritise up-front investment in reducing risk. AA initiatives need to be carefully layered to fill this gap, while also incentivising long-term planning and investment by governments, individuals and the local civil society organisations that represent them. An AA intervention is likely to be more effective in places where good DRM systems are already in place, because these efforts are mutually reinforcing.

A ToC for AA will inevitably have different pathways to change, tailored towards specific hazard types and taking into account local contexts; these need to be clearly articulated so external agencies can be held accountable for their contribution. Humanitarian and development organisations will need to work together in open and flexible ways that allow for learning and reflection with national development partners to develop solutions that reduce human suffering now and in the future. Only then will externally driven AA interventions be relevant for national risk management systems and agencies.

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