

CHAPTER 3

Crisis Resilience Humanitarian Response and Anticipatory Action

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KEY MESSAGES

- The vast majority of humanitarian response is activated after a crisis occurs, delivering lifesaving aid, but at relatively high costs and in a framework that prioritizes short-term solutions over long-term resilience.
- Better evidence can help align humanitarian aid delivery with medium- and long-term development strategies and with resilience building.
- In the anticipatory action approach, costly delays and suffering can be avoided. Pre-allocating financial resources and preplanning responses to be activated when a trigger level is reached in a risk-monitoring system ensure efficient responses to crises.
- Beyond the narrow definition of anticipatory action as a preplanned emergency response, the broader conception of promoting resilience should guide policymakers in investing in long-term development goals even in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

To improve the impact of humanitarian response and anticipatory action, it is important to:

- Increase data collection and analysis, including impact assessments, of humanitarian assistance and anticipatory action programs in different contexts, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- Develop anticipatory action frameworks that pre-identify vulnerabilities and funding triggers, ensure regular data collection for risk monitoring, define clear roles and responsibilities, and identify available financial resources before crises hit.
- Assess the targeting of the humanitarian assistance to identify what groups are being missed and ensure their inclusion.
- Support interventions that reflect the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, such as nutrition-sensitive programming, use of local procurement, support for local institutions, and transitioning aid toward more permanent safety nets.



In human, economic, and environmental terms, the total cost of disaster and crisis response is extremely high, and the disastrous combination of the food price crises coming on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural calamities is straining public budgets and squeezing financial options. In 2020, private and public losses from weather-related disasters alone exceeded a total of US\$258 billion globally – 29 percent above the 2001–2020 average – making it the fifth costliest year on record, and rising temperatures are expected to bring even more frequent and severe extreme weather events.¹ At the same time, conflict has become a leading contributor to humanitarian crisis situations – as seen most recently with the food and energy crises precipitated by the Russia-Ukraine war and refugee flows driven by the Syrian civil war.²

Timely response to crisis situations is critical. Households that have been displaced or lost their livelihoods can rapidly deplete savings and engage in coping strategies of last resort, which have long-term costs for well-being, with poor or near-poor households particularly vulnerable.³

Even worse, shocks can stoke fragility, reduce effectiveness and inclusiveness, and displace standards of good governance, contributing to a perpetual cycle of instability. Institutions and researchers are increasingly grappling with finding the most efficient and effective ways to mitigate disaster costs through preemptive action, preparedness, and relief.

HUMANITARIAN AID FLOWS

Globally, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that US\$41 billion was needed to reach 183 million people targeted for international humanitarian assistance in 2022. Most people in need are living in countries affected by protracted crisis and conflict, with the largest numbers of targeted beneficiaries in Ethiopia (22.3 million), Afghanistan (22.1 million), Yemen (16.0 million), and Syria (12.0 million).⁴ The gap between needs and funding has grown significantly since 2019, with only 46 percent of the global appeal funded in 2021, and international aid funding is not projected

to keep pace with increasing need. Maximizing the efficiency of these aid flows is more important than ever.

Humanitarian response to crisis and disaster situations is grounded in principles of independence, neutrality, and impartiality, which grew out of longstanding concern about the risks of delivering aid in situations where the normal local political authorities are unable or unwilling to do so.⁵ These foundational principles allow humanitarian actors to deliver lifesaving aid in extremely challenging circumstances, but by the same token, they constrain delivery mechanisms and operations in ways that prioritize meeting short-term emergency needs over building resilience and human development in the longer term.⁶ For example, investing in local institutional capacity or procurement from local suppliers, both important for building resilience, invites questions about impartiality and independence, and programming that goes beyond the most immediate human needs for survival may generate controversy with local authorities about how longer-term goals are prioritized.

EVALUATING AID PROGRAM IMPACTS IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CONTEXTS

Compared with social assistance programs in stable contexts, where research has long played a key role,⁷ there is relatively little rigorous research on the impacts of assistance in humanitarian settings. Donors, practitioners, and the academic community have called for more rigorous evaluation of humanitarian assistance programs,⁸ and researchers from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) are major contributors to the small but growing body of evidence in humanitarian and crisis contexts.⁹ Studying humanitarian programming specifically is important because lessons from stable contexts do not always carry over into settings where implementation is more challenging and where beneficiaries face more frequent and severe shocks. For example, the greater level of instability faced by beneficiaries in such contexts may substantially change household investment and risk preferences. Among a series of similarly implemented graduation programs, impacts on

consumption were significantly lower in Yemen than in stable country contexts. This result may reflect difficulties with program implementation or conflict-affected households' greater desire to maintain assets (in this case, livestock) as a buffer stock for coping with future shocks.¹⁰

In a study on World Food Programme (WFP) emergency operations amid the conflict in Mali in 2013–2014, researchers showed that food assistance had a significant impact on micronutrient availability. The increased availability of food translated into gains for child height in areas less directly affected by the conflict, while in the villages most directly affected by conflict, the significant program impacts were on total household expenditures rather than on child nutritional status.¹¹ The study also showed that in areas of Mali most highly exposed to conflict, both general food distribution and school feeding programs led to increased school enrollment, but in areas less exposed to conflict, school feeding programs increased enrollment and educational attainment, while general food distribution was negatively associated with enrollment.¹² These results highlight how impacts of assistance can be affected by the specific emergency context.

While cash-based programs gained popularity in the developing world in the 2000s, cash-based programming for humanitarian responses has emerged as a growing trend only in the past decade. Cash transfers are easily scalable, fast to roll out, and usually considerably cheaper than in-kind assistance and less distorting of local production systems. IFPRI research, including several studies mentioned below, has been cited in good practice guidelines for the use of cash transfers in humanitarian response.¹³

As part of an ongoing partnership with WFP, IFPRI conducted a comparative analysis of cash, voucher, and food assistance using randomized controlled trials in humanitarian response contexts in Ecuador, Niger, Uganda, and Yemen.¹⁴ Cash or vouchers were found to be more effective for improving dietary quality in most contexts, but food distribution generally had greater impact in terms of increasing calorie consumption. Yet the relative benefits of cash transfers or vouchers compared with equally valued food distribution varied

considerably depending on the country, highlighting the need for research in a wide variety of contexts to provide relevant guidance to humanitarian operations.

Two other recent studies in Yemen highlighted the nutritional impacts of cash transfers supported by international aid: an emergency cash transfer program combined with child nutrition programming had significant impacts on child dietary quality as well as reduced stunting for the poorest households during the current crisis; and cash transfers during an earlier period of instability were associated with less wasting.¹⁵

ASSESSING THE TARGETING OF HUMANITARIAN AID

Another key challenge for humanitarian aid operations is how best to target relief efforts. Compared with development programs in stable contexts, humanitarian responders have far less administrative data, more mobile populations, and a much shorter timeline for identifying the neediest beneficiaries. Interagency evaluations of humanitarian relief operations in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Yemen highlight challenges such as a lack of consolidated databases across agencies and NGO clusters, insufficient geographic targeting of aid due to difficulties with access, and perceptions (indicated by focus groups) that the selection of aid recipients is arbitrary or unfair.¹⁶ While not all targeting is efficiently organized and trusted even in stable contexts, the greater local accountability for the implementing institutions in stable contexts may lead to more positive perceptions of the targeting process.¹⁷ Rigorous assessment of targeting of humanitarian responses can clarify what groups risk being missed by existing methodologies. For example, an assessment of a food distribution effort in Ethiopia showed that, in contrast to the national social protection program, which targeted households in the poorer quintiles of the wealth distribution, local officials targeted humanitarian food assistance to households with more wealth, but which had experienced a negative shock in the past 12 months.¹⁸

“Shock-responsive” social protection programs solve many of the challenges of emergency

targeting by leveraging existing programs and databases to increase assistance during crises (see Chapter 5). However, it is important to keep in mind that inclusion in national social protection programs may be biased against some of the most vulnerable, such as migrants, people lacking legal status, women, and ethnic minorities.¹⁹

LINKING HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE WITH LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT

At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the global humanitarian community recognized the importance of coordination and strategic thinking around the humanitarian–development–peace “triple nexus” of rapid response, long-term recovery and growth, and political stability.

In practice, the long-term development thinking that has been operationalized in humanitarian response includes: (1) ensuring that food relief is nutrition-sensitive to support long-term health; (2) prioritizing local procurement and processing of food used in relief operations; (3) strengthening local institutions such as schools and local NGOs as partners during aid delivery; and (4) designing emergency aid programs in such a way that they can develop into national safety nets.²⁰

NUTRITION. In terms of nutrition-sensitive food aid, distribution of fortified foods targeted to young children as part of the relief response in emergencies has been shown to prevent major losses in nutritional status. Providing supplemental food items with key micronutrients to children under two years old and to pregnant and lactating mothers is particularly important to ensure nutritional adequacy for human development during the first 1,000 days of life.²¹ Children who receive adequate nutrition will have better health and earnings in the future, contributing to long-run development well after the crisis that led to the food distribution has ended. IFPRI and WFP jointly developed WFP’s nutrition-sensitive program guidance by designing and evaluating nutrition-sensitive programs across a range of sectors. This guidance was rolled out in 2017–2018 and is being followed up by continued collaboration to assess the impact of nutrition-sensitive programming.²²

LOCAL PROCUREMENT. Another way to keep the long-run impacts in view when running emergency response operations is to prioritize local procurement when possible. Relying solely on imported staple foods for food distribution can risk distorting local agricultural markets by lowering the demand for locally grown food. This distortion not only harms local farmers, but in protracted crisis situations can also reduce farmers' incentives to invest in production of locally consumed food items.²³ An IFPRI evaluation of WFP's Purchase for Progress program – in which low-income farmers were contracted as suppliers and provided with storage facilities – found significant increases in revenue for the farmers in the program, achieved through both higher prices and greater quantities sold.²⁴

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS. International disaster aid has the potential to either undermine or support local institutions. This is particularly concerning in weak states and conflict-affected contexts, where long-run recovery relies on the establishment of good governance. Examples cited by researchers of cases where aid undermined local governance include the humanitarian crisis in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and the failures of state building in Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁵

SOCIAL SAFETY NETS. In addition to creating shock-responsive safety nets pre-crisis, designing humanitarian aid to transition into a more permanent social safety net provides an opportunity for both strengthening local institutions and promoting longer-term development goals (see Chapter 5). For example, in Yemen, funneling emergency cash transfers through a preexisting social protection system has preserved national institutions and maintained a basis for eventual reestablishment of the system post-crisis.²⁶

ANTICIPATORY ACTION

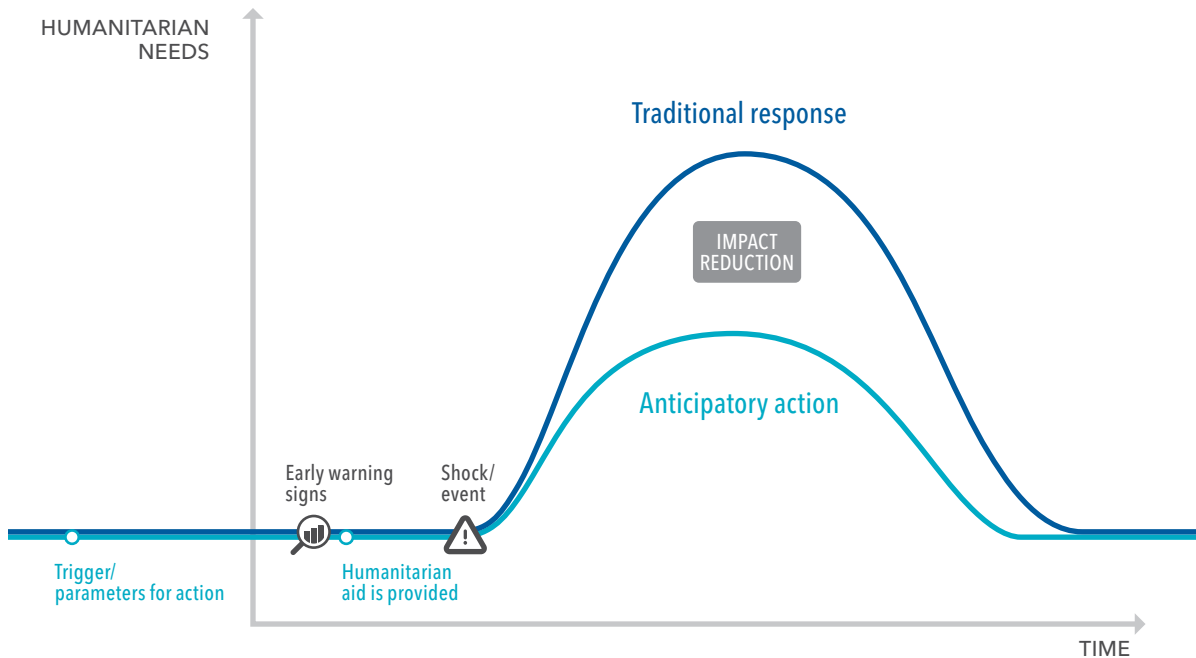
With the overriding focus on meeting immediate needs and maintaining access, humanitarian responders may not always be able to deliver aid in ways that minimize costs and maximize long-term development goals. But what if, instead of being organized on a tight timeline post-crisis, responses

could be planned ahead of time? This is the goal of the anticipatory action framework.

Now being piloted in multiple contexts, anticipatory action aims to protect households and communities before disaster strikes. The approach seeks to use humanitarian resources more efficiently by pre-allocating them to be spent in ways that reduce the impact of anticipated disasters.²⁷ This means using early warning or forecasting tools combined with predetermined decision-making protocols to inform early action for timely emergency response at the local, national, and/or international levels (see Chapter 2). Triggers or thresholds are pre-defined within data and risk monitoring systems. Figure 1 illustrates how initiating actions to address a crisis after early warning signs are detected, but before the full weight of the shock is felt, reduces the peak humanitarian need compared to traditional post-crisis humanitarian response.

Without an anticipatory action framework, fundraising in emergency situations, while urgent, can be complicated. Public and private sector actors, responders, and donors will need to reconcile their own spending priorities in the context of humanitarian need and decision-making structures that may be inadequate. As a result, humanitarian operations may be slow to start or to reach necessary capacity,²⁸ and it can take weeks or months for humanitarian aid to reach people in need if the response is only started post-crisis, often worsening impacts. Potential bottlenecks include evidence and data challenges, organizational mandates and operational policies, risk tolerance, and security and access issues. The 2011–2012 Somali famine is a prime example. In this case, nearly 260,000 people died, more than half of whom were children under five years of age. Analysis shows that, despite clear warning signs, large-scale morbidity, mortality, and displacement were caused by delays in international aid.²⁹ This has sparked major debates and some changes in humanitarian aid policy and practice – including a critical view of early warning mechanisms that failed to generate a rapid response. Taking this into consideration, anticipatory action initiatives need to operationalize preplanned response protocols and resource distribution strategies so that needs are met before they become critical and so impacts are mitigated.

FIGURE 1 Benefits of anticipatory action framework



Source: Reproduced from OCHA Services, Center for Humdata, accessed February 1, 2023. <https://centre.humdata.org/anticipatory-action/>

For anticipatory action initiatives to be effective requires preparation in four areas:

PRE-IDENTIFIED VULNERABILITIES AND TRIGGER INDICATORS. Ensuring effective targeting and timely response requires an understanding of risks, exposure, and vulnerability in the particular context. With these clearly defined, monitoring systems can be more appropriately designed, using bio-physical, social, and economic data to determine triggers for action. These types of mechanisms are especially challenged in very dynamic conflict- and migration-affected situations, where data on compound crises can be scarce and unreliable. In early applications, this approach was primarily used for weather hazards, but has now expanded to a wider range of risks such as epidemics and pests.

IMPACT-BASED RISK-MONITORING INFORMATION SERVICES. Risk monitoring requires regular data collection and calculation of updated risk levels using some of the approaches discussed in Chapter 2. Information services should be designed to ensure forecasts are impact-based, warnings reach the

appropriate response agencies, and the vulnerable, and recipients understand how to respond.³⁰

CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR DECISION-MAKING AND RESPONSE. Emergency responses may include, but are not limited to, cash subsidies and insurance, in-kind aid distribution, social protection services, humanitarian services and supply deliveries, and shelter. Roles, responsibilities, and procedures must be clear among all stakeholders involved in a humanitarian response initiative, and the initiative should be embedded within a broader disaster risk management and social protection strategy. This can be especially complex in fragile and conflict-affected settings, for example when government authority or capacity may be weak or nonexistent.

IDENTIFY AVAILABLE FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES. The intent of anticipatory action is to establish data-informed decision-support systems to trigger quick disbursement of resources in emergency situations. Advanced planning can help identify needs and

match financial resources with eligible beneficiaries, earmarking local and international resources and establishing disbursement processes.

INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATIONS

Despite broad agreement on the importance of planning ahead to mitigate crises, the structure of international humanitarian aid and government disaster response has not favored preemptive action. For example, some empirical evidence supports the idea that traditional post-disaster international aid creates a moral hazard problem – national governments that anticipate aid inflows are under-incentivized to invest in disaster mitigation.³¹ Lack of coordination between agencies or ministries at both the national and international levels and between those responsible for emergency response and long-term investments has also been blamed for the lack of attention to anticipatory action.³²

Recent institutional innovations, however, are poised to facilitate funding for anticipatory action at the global level. The UN Food Security Cluster Anticipatory Action Task Force has called for more donor funding to be dedicated to flexible uses or anticipatory actions,³³ and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization has initiated several anticipatory action pilot projects with a total budget of US\$6.2 million in 26 countries.³⁴ In May 2021, the G7 Foreign Ministers announced a commitment to “making the humanitarian system as anticipatory as possible” through both existing pooled funds and new financing solutions. Small-scale anticipatory components have already been added to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) Disaster Relief Emergency Fund, and the World Bank's International Development Agency (IDA) Crisis Response Window.

Anticipatory action mechanisms are based on an action plan that is approved in advance and includes an agreed trigger for releasing funding to enact the plan, related to the expectation that a crisis is imminent. For example, the Forecast-based Action component of the IFRC Disaster Relief Emergency Fund launched in 2018 provides ready-to-go financing that can be released by early action protocols when triggered by forecasted

natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, cold waves, and volcanic eruptions.³⁵ The IDA Crisis Response Window similarly provides funding conditional on reaching a trigger point for enacting a previously prepared Food Security Crisis Preparedness Response Plan.

HOW MUCH AND WHAT TYPES OF ANTICIPATORY ACTION ARE COST-EFFECTIVE?

The design and operation of anticipatory action initiatives are highly contextual. Research on the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of these schemes is scant, and there are especially few examples of initiatives incorporating conflict prevention, mitigation, and peacebuilding. Inherent challenges arise in evaluating anticipatory action schemes and, because of the relative novelty of this approach, indicators and evidence of success are still being defined. Data collection is challenging in quick-onset disaster situations, and the time period over which the relative costs and benefits are expected to be calculated can be extremely long. But some attempts have already been made to collect experiences with anticipatory action and evidence to evaluate this approach.³⁶

One clear benefit is the time savings in deploying humanitarian response operations. Action plans that include pre-positioning relief supplies, training first responders, and developing contingency plans for specific expected disasters can potentially allow relief to reach intended beneficiaries with better targeting, at greater speed and lower cost, and in ways that are better integrated with local markets and institutions. Significant savings in both time and cost have been found in practice when the IFRC used anticipatory action approaches to flooding in West and Central Africa and when WFP pre-positioned essential commodities for distribution in several countries.³⁷ The cost-savings free up resources for long-term adaptation investments, providing an incentive for donors to advocate for the broader establishment of anticipatory action systems.

Another way to measure the benefits of anticipatory action is to look at the degree to which earlier responses serve to protect long-term household

and social welfare by reducing reliance on negative risk-coping mechanisms in the short term. For example, the short-term impact of drought on households may be income loss for farmers and production losses from crops and livestock, while long-term impacts include negative health effects, greater gender disparities, and reduced education, as well as increased migration, conflict, and political instability. Attempts to quantify such costs even at the level of aggregated estimates using an approach such as BACI (benefits of action–cost of inaction) can be informative about the potential for long-term savings from early investment in anticipatory action.³⁸

Some limited quasi-experimental evidence on forecast-based financing provides more concrete measures of the gains from anticipatory action. Forecast-based financing is a type of anticipatory action in which distribution of aid is conditional on the forecast of an imminent crisis (see Chapter 2). A study of an IFRC forecast-based financing program in Mongolia showed that herder households who received assistance prior to an extreme winter season lost less livestock than households that did not receive assistance.³⁹ A qualitative study of a similar program in Bangladesh, which delivered government aid to communities identified as most likely to experience flooding in the upcoming season, found that beneficiary households used the cash to maintain food consumption and fund evacuation costs.⁴⁰

PROMOTING CRISIS RESILIENCE

Anticipatory action shifts humanitarian funding availability from the response phase to an earlier point in time when it can be used for resilience building. In some models of anticipatory action programs, emergency funds reach individual households before a crisis hits, allowing those households to make investments that protect their livelihoods and assets. In other cases, the emergency funds are not distributed directly to households, but are used by local governments or other humanitarian actors to make investments in time to mitigate the worst effects of the crisis.

While anticipatory action is usually narrowly defined as a financing mechanism that is released based on a predefined forecast condition, investing

in resilience to crises is also a broader concept. Resilience is most commonly understood as the ability to withstand and recover from external shocks, ensuring that short-run shocks do not have long-lasting adverse consequences. A wide variety of development goals – such as decreasing poverty, increasing access to basic services and education, improving institutions, and, at the household level, investing in productive assets and physical and mental health – can be viewed not only as ends in themselves, but also as means to improving households' capacity to absorb or adapt to shocks, as demonstrated by a large and growing body of research.⁴¹ Despite this ongoing work, important knowledge gaps remain and new questions have emerged from the most recent crises.

GENERATING RIGOROUS EVIDENCE

Monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment (MEIA) remains a major gap in anticipatory action and, more generally, in humanitarian and development interventions in fragile and conflict-affected settings (see Chapter 7). More evidence is needed on the impacts of different types of humanitarian assistance in different contexts, particularly in the most challenging places, and on targeting and shock-responsive social programming, integrating emergency aid with long-term resilience, and developing effective anticipatory action programs. More research is also needed on how to measure the cost-benefit ratio of investing in resilience. Operationalizing anticipatory action approaches requires work on building data sources to measure risks and on organizing stakeholder coalitions. A library of good practices, in addition to guidance for feasible and relevant MEIA techniques for anticipatory action, is needed to help develop and inform crisis responses. To this end, a new CGIAR Research Initiative on Fragility, Conflict, and Migration will implement a work program aiming to strengthen anticipatory action in complex crises and provide guidance to humanitarian programming on building long-run resilience. With evidence from this research program, policies can be implemented to reduce human suffering in the wake of natural disasters and conflict events.