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Local government led anticipatory action: Lessons from Mali and Uganda

This report examines examples of anticipatory actions led by local authorities. It assesses the potential strengths of these actions and sets out what decision makers can learn from these examples.

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By { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Magda Nassef", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/magda-nassef" } } [Magda Nassef](#) { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Raphael Lotira Arasio", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/raphael-lotira-arasio" } } [Raphael Lotira Arasio](#) { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Bakary Kone", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/bakary-kone" } } [Bakary Kone](#) { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Olive Lomokol", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/olive-lomokol" } } [Olive Lomokol](#) { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Simon Levine", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/simon-levine" } } [Simon Levine](#)
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There is currently little strategic cooperation between local authorities and international organisations on forward-looking ('anticipatory') action to avert crises. SPARC wants to elevate the voice of local government in international discourse on anticipatory action. If the aid sector recognises how local authorities are forward-thinking and take forward looking action, it could foster stronger alignment and collaboration between international anticipatory efforts and state systems.

This study aims to collect examples of anticipatory actions by local authorities, which are often overlooked by international actors, partly due to different practices and terminology.

We set out to assess the potential strengths the examples had due to their permanent presence on the ground, their proximity to local communities, and their understanding of local context and needs. The report looked at what could be learned from the examples, what constraints local authorities had faced and what would make them more effective in responding to shock warnings.

We used a case study approach to document examples of local authorities taking proactive action in the face of warnings of crisis. We held repeated conversations with individual local government staff in two communes in Mopti region, Mali and two districts in Karamoja in Uganda. Detailed timelines were created of the threats, warnings, and the actions taken. The case studies included floods, droughts, a locust plague and epidemics of human and livestock diseases.

Findings

- All the local authorities studied had responded to shock warnings with proactive or anticipatory actions of varying kinds. Their sources of information ranged from international early warning systems to phone calls from local residents.
- A reliance on formal networks alone was not sufficient. Local authorities also relied on informal systems and networks, both to receive information and to act.
- Even neighbouring local authorities had very different experiences, both due to differences in the details of their situation and because action relied on the initiative of individual staff members.
- Successful action needed trust and strong relationships that required time to build. Prior investments in resilience or disaster risk reduction were often key building blocks that enabled anticipatory action to be taken at short notice.
- Their actions were more effective when supported by central government

Policy implications

- Local authorities have unique advantages for anticipatory action, being institutions both of the state and of local communities. All actors interested in promoting anticipatory action should know what local authorities are already doing.
- Given their awareness of how local authorities operate, their own ways of working should be the starting point, rather than introducing a formal 'anticipatory action' framework and jargon.
- The diverse experiences of neighbouring authorities means that predefined processes and replicating standardised models are not likely to create sustainable change. A genuine approach to partnership demands the co-creation of approaches to anticipatory action.
- When informal systems are overlooked, opportunities for quicker, more effective anticipatory action are missed.
- Effective anticipatory action requires foundations and long-term investment. This includes investment in building trust with local authorities and between them and communities. This takes time.
- Appropriate anticipatory action at local level requires locally appropriate triggers. It cannot work with centralised triggers.

Women fisherman, Mali. Credit: Oumar Diop / UNDP

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