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# 10+1 WAYS TO TAKE ANTICIPATORY ACTION TO SCALE IN CONFLICTS AND RECURRING CRISES

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*Please note that this text is unedited. The discussion paper is designed to share emerging thinking quickly, even before polishing its presentation!*

*This discussion paper draws on five years of research through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) Programme, which has aimed to inform policies, practices and investments to better support the resilience of dryland communities in Africa and the Middle East.*

*It represents our emerging thoughts on the subject, not our final analysis. It is written to encourage the wider contributions of others into our thinking as a stepping stone to our more developed analysis.*

## Introduction

This paper does not include a case for including anticipatory action in an overall disaster management strategy. We assume that the importance of forward-looking decision-making when crises are threatened is generally accepted, at least by those likely to be reading this paper.

Successful models of anticipatory action (AA) are coming of age. They are starting to be taken to scale as a response to certain kinds of crisis, but less so in conflicts and recurrent crises. To achieve scale in this latter set of crises, the 'difficult places', we need to look carefully at the models of AA already being used and think what a model for conflicts and recurrent crises has to look like for it to reach scale.

Riverine floods are the clearest illustration of how the current paradigm works – and of the conditions that enable it to work. Once warnings are received from upstream, floods that come from rivers are highly predictable in their timing and their trajectories, and in the geographical areas they will affect. They are usually of limited duration, meaning that feasible responses can be and have been identified; and the overall context in which they occur is 'normal' – an economy that remains largely unaffected by a disaster limited in scope, markets that work and a state that functions (at least to a reasonable degree). A model of anticipatory action has been piloted by humanitarian agencies that is based on establishing an early warning system that sets off an alarm when certain pre-agreed thresholds are met. This triggers the swift roll out of a pre-planned and pre-funded response, such as emergency payments. This model is now being adopted and taken to scale outside the humanitarian sector, e.g. where the emergency payments become part of a national shock-responsive social protection system.

## Why conflicts and recurrent crises are difficult places for anticipatory action

Conflicts, protracted crises and recurrent crises present a different challenge. Crises there can rarely be predicted by reference to a single shock. Active conflict is often combined with droughts and/or floods, in a context where widespread insecurity has disrupted markets and led to a degraded economy that offers few 'emergency' livelihood opportunities by which people can cope when their main livelihood is hit. This means that there is often no clear 'before' a shock. Where semi-crisis is permanent, there is still a value in being forward-thinking, but the challenge is much harder because, unlike in the model for riverine floods, there may be no obvious trigger for a spike in the crisis and no clear path along which future scenarios will develop. Because people may already be relying on every coping strategy they can find, and because the crisis might not be over within a few months, there may also be no obvious answers that allow people to head off crisis. A cash transfer will always be welcomed, but won't necessarily open up any new doors for people to escape from a coming threat, and may even be just as or more welcome later when needs escalate. If this was not enough, the functioning of state institutions is usually highly constrained in conflicts and recurrent crises by lack of financial resources and skilled personnel – partly because of competition from the international aid sector. The weak rule of law and contested authority mean that trust is low, and mistrust may extend even to the weather warnings and advice offered by state institutions.

## Where anticipatory action currently sits in 'difficult places'

The vast majority of humanitarian aid goes every year to the same, relatively small number of countries afflicted by conflicts and recurrent crises. A humanitarian sector has developed in these places that thinks and operated with a certain amount of independence, that has been driven partly by humanitarian principles – the need to be neutral in a conflict, especially where the governments is a party to the conflict, because otherwise assistance can be and almost always is, politicised. This tendency has been reinforced over many years by the situation already described of widespread weak institutional capacity and low levels of trust and accountability.

'Anticipatory action' has been developed by the humanitarian sector as a way of improving humanitarian response and its timeliness. For various reasons, they been designed as an independent mechanism, sitting purely within an independent humanitarian sector – often not even relying on national meteorological agencies. Whatever the strengths, or even necessity, maintain independence and neutrality in humanitarian response, even the language of anticipatory action is distinctly "humanitarian". As a result, there is little relationship between AA and the ways in which forward-looking thinking and action are a part of national responses by central government and local authorities.

## The challenge of taking anticipatory action to scale in conflicts and recurrent crises

Even before the recent cuts to the sector, there were never enough resources to respond to all the acute needs in crises in these most difficult places. Although the logic of AA is widely accepted, it remains difficult to make the case for using scarce resources to address potential future needs when existing acute needs are going unmet. It is highly unlikely that anticipatory action will ever command anything more than a small minority of humanitarian funds which themselves are highly restricted. This is not due to a weakness in the case for AA, but simply a reflection of reality. The current anticipatory action model, sitting in an independent humanitarian sector and designed to provide resources for implementing discreet humanitarian projects before crises develop, can never hope to achieve anything like the scale required to make a significant difference. This is an uncomfortable truth for those who have worked hard to pilot what is in many ways an

essential approach. This should not be seen, though, as accepting defeat: if we take the essential principle of anticipatory action and find a very different model, appropriate to the much more difficult challenges in conflicts recurrent crises, potential ways forward for achieving scale and significant impact can be found.

## Thinking wider about Anticipatory Action

The response of the humanitarian sector to the challenges of working in conflicts and recurrent crises – weak institutional capacities, widespread lack of resources for state functioning, a difficult enabling environment – has been to reduce thinking about AA to an ad hoc standalone, a humanitarian issue. This may be understandable, but it has been limiting. If we are serious in wanting to take anticipatory action to scale, we need to confront the challenges rather than accept the conventional wisdom about how AA can be run.

The current model has a very narrow vision about what is ‘Anticipatory Action’. It is the name for a specific model, rather than a way of acting, using forward-looking (anticipatory) decision-making. If our discussions were about promoting ‘forward-looking decision-making’ rather than AA, we would not automatically restrict our thinking to our own sector. It is more than obvious that forward-looking decision-making is needed by governments at all levels, by providers of services, businesses – and most importantly of all by the individuals, families and communities who are threatened by a looming crisis or spike in an existing crisis. The role of any agency trying to support ‘forward-looking decision-making’ could never be restricted only to their own decisions about their own projects. Their role can only be to support everyone’s capacity to make their own forward-looking decisions – including, of course, the capacity of humanitarian agencies to be forward looking, not simply in their AA projects (i.e. those funded through a specific mechanism) but in everything they do.

A door to achieving scale suddenly presents itself. Increased funding for AA may be important, but that is not an issue that we treat in this paper this. Much greater scale can be achieved if agencies working on AA take the role of catalysts and facilitators of anticipatory actions, and not only of implementers of preplanned, pre-funded projects.

## Ten recommendations for taking anticipatory action to scale in conflicts and recurrent crises

The following recommendations are not presented as an exhaustive list of how to think about anticipatory action in conflicts recurrent crises. Much else has been written by others, and much more remains to be analysed and written. All the points below have emerged from specific research projects conducted by SPARC over the past five years. They are not offered as a blueprint, but as SPARC’s contribution to a debate that will hopefully continue to advance over many years.

1. **Anticipatory action should be part of an overall disaster risk management (DRM) strategy.** People already living so near to the edge that it is difficult to find opportunities which can be opened by AA. Those opportunities need to be built first. This work, under labels such as DRR, resilience building or Risk Informed Development (RID), is often the foundation for anticipatory action. Investments are needed in resilient livelihoods, in systems building, etc. These all need to be planned in a single coherent strategy. The risks of humanitarian action undermining long-term structures is also present for anticipatory humanitarian action, reinforcing the need for an overall crisis management strategy in which humanitarian actors play a part, but which is not in their silo.

2. **Support people's own anticipatory action, choices and decisions.** The role of aid actors is to give people more agency – so they have more options and greater power to take better decisions for themselves. This is both a moral position and a practical one. People's best options are determined by so many factors – how the crisis has affected their part of the country, the options available in their locality, their livelihood type, their socioeconomic status, the degree of marginalisation that they suffer, their risk tolerance, etc. It is impossible to design context specific responses for different people in a centralised way. We must think of supporting people's own anticipatory actions rather than only about 'doing anticipatory action programming'. This means accepting that we cannot decide for everyone what they should do. The difficulties entailed in this loss of control, 'psychologically' for individuals and organisations, have to be recognised to be addressed.
3. **Think diversity, not blueprints.** Heterogeneity means that we cannot have one approach even in a single country. Different activities need to be taken (by people themselves and by those supporting them) even within a country. Projects designed for one place can provide useful lessons for another, but they should not be copied. There is often a perceived contradiction between acting locally and acting at scale. The imperative is to find ways of managing support at scale that can result in locally specific approaches.
4. **Avoid linking all funding to a single centralised mechanism.** Different places need different responses, as discussed above. Different places also need responses with different calendars. There cannot be a single set of triggers at national level for interventions across a whole country. Not can there be a single set of triggers for activating plans for all the kinds of interventions that are labelled 'anticipatory'. This makes no sense. This kind of centralised model is not appropriate for an AA strategy in conflicts and recurrent crises.
5. **Flexibility is key.** Situations change very quickly and unpredictably, especially where several different shops interact in myriad ways. Flexibility is therefore needed. It is essential to have a plan – but dangerous to stick to it. A plan must be the basis for ongoing situation monitoring and adaptation in planning. AA has been built around predetermined triggers to avoid delays (and politicisation) in making decisions. There is a strong rationale for this, but its limitations in conflicts and recurrent crises must be acknowledged and catered for. There will never be enough data on every possible shock coming, so flexibility is required in prediction making, and an openness needed to new data on emerging threats.
6. **Anticipation should be incorporated into everything.** The measure of our success should not be in how many anticipatory projects we can run, nor even in the impact of all those programmes or projects. The measure of our success is how much more forward-looking action emerges as a result of our support. We should look to create such action everywhere. We discussed the importance of supporting forward-looking agency above. We also need to improve forward-looking decision-making across the aid sector. It is not enough to have a sub-set of humanitarian projects which are 'anticipatory'. All humanitarian action needs to be looking and planning ahead, including actions designed to meet needs which will emerge during the crisis, because otherwise it can never be timely.
7. **Vulnerability analysis to ensure anticipatory action is inclusive.** Unless deliberate efforts are made to be inclusive, some people get left out of support. Vulnerability analysis helps those delivering humanitarian support to ensure that they know the needs of different people, they understand the processes that marginalised some people and they know how to ensure that those with the most needs are reached. This kind of analysis is just as critical for AA, whether that is thought about as anticipatory humanitarian projects or in a wider sense of giving people information, tools and opportunities to have better forward-looking options. That means that AA analysis has to be 'political', based on an understanding of power relations, and not merely technical, based on an understanding of rainfall or

agriculture. The need to tailor AA to meet the different needs of men and women is acknowledged, but understanding what this should look like in different places is a task ahead of us.

8. **The trade-off between demands for scarce resources.** It is very difficult to manage the trade-off between the need to use scarce resources to address pressing needs and value of using them to prevent worse needs arising. If forward-looking thinking is to become a system-wide standard way of working, then a shared vision and strategy are needed, based on an appreciation of the concerns of all, even of those whose decisions we may find frustrating. The strategy must focus on the objectives – how to enhance anticipatory thinking – rather than on achieving a specific output, such as a funding mechanism. There are pros and cons of various alternative funding modalities, such as preapproved funds, flexible contingency funds and flexibility within mainstream funds for service delivery and longer-term structural investments. Different countries should be able to choose their own preferred approach: the essential is to have an agreed plan!
9. **Trust is everything.** Trust is one of the first casualties of conflicts and state fragility. But for anticipatory action to succeed, there is a need to build trust – trust in the EW, trust in the plan, trust in the recommendations of different actors. Building trust takes time. A long-term strategy for trust building is essential preparatory work for AA – it can be thought of as the anticipatory action for enabling AA.
10. **Look for partnerships with local authorities.** Local authorities are usually (but not always!) the least political part of the state in conflicts. They are often staffed by people who know the local areas and who have a reasonable understanding of how crises affect their local populations in different areas. It is almost inevitable that they are thinking ahead in some ways, but may require support of different kinds to be able to be more forward looking in decision-making and in implementation. Local authorities can provide a bridge between the government or the state and citizens and what is local. They can also provide a bridge for independent aid actors with both local communities and with state structures. They should be given even more attention than usual in conflicts and recurrent crises.
11. **Recognise the potential limitations of anticipatory action in difficult crises.** The sad truth is that even the best anticipatory action might not work: our research in different counties has found that even with hindsight, it is not always possible to see what could have been done to avoid crisis, either by government, aid agencies or people themselves. We have to recognise the limits of what anticipatory action can achieve at scale in crises of unpredictable duration at scale. All decision-making is difficult in conflicts and recurrent crises, whether for humanitarian action, for service delivery by local authorities or in the dilemmas facing farmers, pastoralists and traders. All those difficulties remain decision-making is anticipatory. Anticipation should not be used to replace other quality demands: it just adds one more this.

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