

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

LOCAL GOVERNMENT-LED ANTICIPATORY ACTION

Lessons from Mali and Uganda

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Motivation

Currently, there is little cooperation between local authorities and international organisations on strategies for using forward-looking ('anticipatory') action to avert crises. Anticipatory actions by local authorities are often overlooked by international actors, partly due to different practices and terminology. If aid agencies would recognise how local authorities think about the future and take anticipatory actions, it would help align and coordinate international and local anticipatory efforts, including with state systems.

Purpose

We aimed to collect examples of anticipatory actions by local authorities to assess the potential strengths of local authorities — such as their permanent presence on the ground, their closeness to local communities and their understanding of local context and needs; and to learn what constraints local authorities face and what would make them more effective in responding to hazard warnings.

Approach and methods

In two communes in Mopti region, Mali, and in two districts in Karamoja, Uganda, we documented how local authorities had taken proactive action in the face of shock warnings. Repeated conversations were held with individual staff at the local authorities to draw up detailed timelines of hazards, warnings and actions taken. Common hazards included floods, droughts, a locust plague and epidemics of human and livestock disease.

Findings

All four local authorities had responded to hazard warnings with proactive or anticipatory actions of varying kinds. Their sources of information ranged from international early warning systems (EWS) to phone calls from local residents, to observing the patterns of bird migrations, to disease information from monitoring systems that they had established.

Local authorities did not rely on formal networks alone: they also used informal systems and networks, both to receive information and to take action.

Experiences of anticipatory action differed considerably between local authorities, even neighbouring ones, owing partly to different contexts and circumstances, but also because actions relied on the initiative of individual staff members.

Successful action depended on trust and strong relationships between everyone that had to work together (in the community, in the local authority, in non-government organisations (NGOs), in central ministries, etc.); this needed time to build.

Prior investments in resilience or disaster risk reduction (DRR) were often key building blocks that made it possible for anticipatory action to be taken at short notice.

Local authorities' actions were more effective when supported by central government.

Policy implications

Local authorities are uniquely positioned to support anticipatory action, being institutions both of the state and of local communities. All actors promoting anticipatory action should know what local authorities are already doing in this area.

Given the informality of many local authority operations, local authorities' ways of working should be the starting point, rather than introducing a formal anticipatory action framework and jargon.

The diversity of experiences even of neighbouring authorities means that predefined processes and replicating standardised models are not likely to create sustainable change. Genuine partnership demands co-creation of anticipatory action.

When informal systems are overlooked, opportunities for quicker, more effective anticipatory action are missed. Effective anticipatory action cannot just happen. It requires foundations (e.g. systems or relationships already in place) and long-term investment – including taking the time to build trust with local authorities, and between local authorities and communities.

In the aid sector, financing for anticipatory action is triggered when predetermined parameters meet predefined thresholds at the national level. However, locally appropriate triggers are needed for appropriate – and appropriately timed – anticipatory action at the local level.

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