

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

ANTICIPATORY ACTION IN ADVANCE OF ‘WICKED CRISES’

Insights from a real-time study of people’s lives in Somalia 2020–2022

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Key messages

- It is much more difficult than would be hoped to find viable anticipatory action that people could have taken to mitigate the developing crisis in Somalia in advance. There were rational reasons why people didn’t take actions which may seem to have been good ideas to outsiders with hindsight.
- The main constraint was the lack of alternative strategies made available by the local economy. Investing in supporting such opportunities over longer timeframes will create opportunities for people to find their own anticipatory action, and (but only secondarily) more opportunities for agencies to offer assistance for anticipatory action.
- As each rainy season approached, people were planning for reasonable rains, even though there were seasonal forecasts indicating a likelihood of poor rains. Our interviewees’ information networks were well developed but ensuring that reliable and trusted seasonal weather forecasting is integrated into their planning will be a prerequisite for supporting their anticipatory action.
- The crisis took a wide variety of trajectories in different places, and people’s livelihoods followed a myriad of paths through it. Support for a wide variety of strategies or programming cannot best be organised and managed as a single anticipatory action instrument with a single funding mechanism and one common trigger in the context of ‘wicked crises’.

Introduction: Anticipatory action and ‘wicked crises’

Governments and aid agencies have had promising results with anticipatory action, i.e. support offered when a crisis is predicted but before it develops. These experiences have been in straightforward crises, where trajectories are predictable, the scale of the crisis is limited, and where technical solutions are reasonably well identified. Anticipatory action is increasingly being promoted in what could be called ‘wicked crises’, such as that occurring in the Horn of Africa in 2020–2022. In addition to being protracted, more severe and on a wider geographical scale, such crises are also much more complex.¹ Analysing how crisis-affected people take their own anticipatory action seemed to offer a way to understand how support can best be offered as crises threaten, and what are the windows of opportunity for doing so.

¹ For example, in highland Peru one might imagine that the growing rural non-farm economy, and migration to urban areas, meant farmers invested in diversified enterprises and employment rather than their farms. But that hypothesis remains to be tested.

In 2020, the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) research programme used the advance warnings of a possible drought in Somalia to set up a panel of farmers and pastoralists in three study sites in Somaliland, Puntland and the 6 SPARC Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises Middle Shabelle Region in southern Somalia. Participants were interviewed in four rounds, up to early 2022, when they explained their livelihoods, what they were expecting to happen and what they were doing to prepare for the future. This study is not an analysis of any anticipatory projects implemented in Somalia and, to our knowledge, none of the interviewees was receiving assistance from any anticipatory action aid projects during the interview period.

The crisis, which may not have reached its peak as this report is being finalised in early 2023, has been caused by a succession of shocks, which are well documented elsewhere. Parts of Somalia have been affected to different degrees by plagues of locusts from 2019; economic disruption has been caused by COVID-19; repeated seasons of below average rains have occurred between the second (October, November, December or OND) 2020 rains and the second 2022 rains (i.e. five seasons); and there has been repeated flooding. All these events have occurred in a country that has suffered protracted conflict and insecurity. Seasonal forecasts were available predicting a likelihood of below average rains each time, although different meteorological models produced different forecasts for the first (March, April, May or MAM) rainy seasons.

Identifying actions and decision-making

Identifying people's own anticipatory actions proved harder than expected for several reasons. Because they live with perpetual uncertainty, people's livelihood planning took the form of constant improvisation, not a scripted performance that is replaced with a 'plan B' in the event of a shock warning. Few had been expecting poor rains before each season. Rather than reacting to a shock warning, they were thinking more in terms of longer-term adaptations, including to a clearly changing climate. Where there were clearer and more certain shock warnings, e.g. to floods and locusts, people did what they could, acting collectively and individually, and investing resources in setting up their early warning communication systems and responses.

Men and women often acted together in collective action, and male and female informants broadly shared the same livelihood priorities in the face of crisis. Almost invariably, men and women both indicated that there was collaboration between them in livelihood decision-making.

Constraints to anticipatory action

The main constraint to taking anticipatory actions was the dearth of alternative opportunities. Participants have been forced to adapt their livelihoods to the frequent shocks that are the norm, so that all alternatives are a part of their normal 'livelihood performance'. Neither the interviewees themselves nor a group of experts convened at roundtables in 2022 could identify much that they could have done differently, even with hindsight. Where it seems to an outsider that there might have been options, e.g. earlier decisions to sell or migrate with livestock, they were not blocked by constraints that a government or aid agency could easily unblock. Without the benefit of hindsight, people refrained from those options for clearly identifiable reasons.

Specifically regarding failed rains, the other main constraint to mitigating crisis in advance was that most informants were expecting reasonably good rains with each season, despite meteorological seasonal forecasts indicating that this was not likely. This information was not reaching people and not being integrated into their planning and decision-making. There were some conflicts between predictions generated by different models specifically for the first (MAM) rains, but science seems to be moving rapidly in this area and there are hopes for new consensus. These discrepancies do not seem to have been a reason for the widespread lack of awareness of seasonal forecasts. People had established and maintained very efficient social networks for sharing information, including forward-looking information. This, combined with the clear evidence of their adaptability and social organisation, suggests that there is a high potential for supporting people to take anticipatory actions, if they can be engaged with forecasts and in discussions of their implications. However, the constraint that there are few opportunities to mitigate protracted drought will remain.

It is extremely positive that anticipatory action is getting more attention, but there is a potentially worrying narrative that it could have played a significant role in mitigating a crisis in Somalia in 2020–2022, had there only been adequate funding. There are three implications behind such a claim: there are clearly identified ways of using anticipatory action funds that have a high probability of achieving significant impact at scale and with known windows of opportunity; anticipatory action (thinking and funding) is adequately integrated into the disaster risk management architecture, so that it can be used most appropriately; it could be possible to recruit and manage resources for anticipatory action on the scale required to make a significant contribution to mitigating crisis of the scale and complexity of Somalia 2020–2022. Each of these implications is doubtful.

Currently, anticipatory action is managed generically within the humanitarian sector. It is generic in two ways. The interventions used are broadly the same across a wide range of crises in different places and countries; and it is treated *sui generis*, where everything labelled as anticipatory action is managed as if it were a part of the same thing, all part of one plan, one funding pot, one timetable, one trigger, one management/reporting framework, and even a single overall evaluation. The corollary is that resources for anticipatory action are planned and managed separately from other interventions that are dealing with the same issues in the same sectors. This does not match how the people affected by crisis plan their lives. They think holistically about short-term and longer-term adaptations.

Linking anticipatory action with investments in climate change adaptation and resilience

Resources available for anticipatory action within a major crisis will always be tiny compared to the scale of the problems. The more that anticipatory action is planned in each sector together with investments for adaptation, which will create opportunities for people to take anticipatory action, the more forward-looking thinking can be used to leverage impact.

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