



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Anticipatory action

Changing the way
we manage disasters



Efficient humanitarian assistance
requires anticipation. For FAO, this means
harnessing risk information systems to act
faster and avert acute hunger.

QU Dongyu
FAO Director-General

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What if we invested in protecting people from disasters rather than wait for the worst to happen?

That's the guiding principle of anticipatory action, a kind of protective humanitarian programming that more and more agencies and governments around the world are now using to shield people from climate- and human-induced disasters. And that's with good reason: evidence continually shows that anticipatory action supports vulnerable people at a stage when receiving aid bears the biggest results: before a crisis has taken place. This means humanitarian interventions can become investments in resilience and progress rather than recovery.

Anticipatory action acknowledges vulnerable people as leaders in development and agents of change in their own lives and communities. And by providing them the right kind of support at the right time, it helps people weather a storm so they can keep going – and growing food.

Investing in the resilience of farmers is a direct investment in the food security of their families and communities – and by extension in the resilience of our food systems. That's why the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been a long-time advocate of anticipatory interventions.

Technological advances are making it easier than ever before to forecast natural and other hazards. With that growing availability of information comes a growing responsibility to act on it. Anticipatory action uses that technology and intervenes quickly based on early warning signs.

Since acting early to protect is often many times cheaper than responding and rebuilding, anticipatory action is not just the more dignified way of supporting communities, it's also often the smarter choice financially. And that's not a trivial point at a moment of unprecedented needs across the world, with aid budgets stretched to the extreme to meet them.

Looking ahead, the challenges of our time are only growing more urgent: natural hazards are becoming more frequent and intense, the number of people displaced by war is the highest ever recorded, and millions more are driven to migrate out of economic necessity.

In some of the worst-hit places, it can seem unrelenting, as one crisis after another strips away the hard-earned but limited assets of the poorest and most vulnerable.

Along with their assets, recurrent crises deprive people of their self-reliance. And valuable development gains can be lost, too: for a family that has no buffer to absorb a shock, losing a cow in a flood or a harvest to drought can mean their daughter can no longer go to school because the fees have become too expensive. Elsewhere, a farmer may be forced to take out loans for new seeds that trap them in a spiral of debt and hunger.

That's why FAO has continuously expanded its capacity to gather and analyse early warning information.

By predicting where hazards will hit and deploying resources when people and their assets can still be saved, anticipatory action is modeling what the future of aid could look like: a future where aid is not just faster but smarter – and ultimately, more dignified. So farming families can keep bringing food and progress to their communities, even in hard times.



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What do anticipatory actions look like?

Anticipatory actions come in many shapes and sizes, but they always come before the shock has impacted people. They are highly time-sensitive and connected to forecasts.

In the food security and agriculture sector, these actions can range from cash transfers that help fishers store their boats and gear ahead of a storm to backyard gardening kits that help families in conflict zones produce food closer to home. In pastoral communities, they often include animal feed and vaccines to

keep essential livestock alive and healthy ahead of drought, while crop farmers may get drip irrigation and drought-resistant seeds.

Whatever the context, all anticipatory actions share the same goal: to protect the assets and agency of farmers, fishers and herders. So they can make it through a shock without going hungry and come out with their livelihoods intact – ready to sow for the next harvest, bring home the next catch and sell milk from healthy cows.

Five key ingredients of an anticipatory action system

1



Crisis timelines

Crisis timelines highlight when and how hazards have impacted people in the past. That makes them valuable tools to analyse the evolution of a hazard and how it might impact people's livelihoods in the future. Combined with seasonality mapping and data on past emergency responses, aid actors can project what agricultural assets are at risk at any given time, identify appropriate early warning signs and build anticipatory actions fit for the local context.

2



Early warning systems

Early warning systems are the cornerstone of any anticipatory action system. They allow FAO and its partners to monitor and clearly communicate early signs of a growing hazard and predict when shocks will happen and where. These could be abnormal weather patterns, for example, or worrying levels of locust breeding activity. They could also be the early signs of conflict or economic crisis. Since early warning systems include pre-defined thresholds that raise the alarm, they trigger anticipatory actions as soon as the data exceeds those thresholds. For FAO, this means working closely with governments and the larger community of scientists, development workers, local communities and humanitarian actors to share data on phenomena as diverse as rainfall, livestock diseases and human migration, to name a few.

3



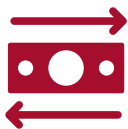
Anticipatory actions

Anticipatory actions are as diverse as the contexts and situations they respond to. But one thing they share is the need for flexibility: actions designed to protect the productive assets of farmers, herders and fishers have to be adjustable in case the context changes. In some cases, this means planning for multiple scenarios and hazards at once. It may mean changing support from drought-resistant rice seeds to backyard gardening kits if field access becomes impossible. Or it may require adding cash to the farming items families receive so they can cover other immediate needs. (See also "What do anticipatory actions look like", page 3.) In designing its actions, FAO builds on the feedback and experiences in participating communities and years of technical knowledge in supporting vulnerable farmers and their livelihoods.



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4



Flexible
financing

Just like anticipatory actions need to be flexible, so does the funding that supports them. There often is little time between a warning and the full force of a disaster bearing down on farming communities. That means the window to protect them against the impacts, as opposed to responding to the damage after the fact, is small. The more flexible the funding that's available, the more likely FAO is able to meet that window and roll out context-appropriate actions before a shock can turn into a crisis. (See “Funding a more resilient future”, page 15.)

5



Evidence

The fact that anticipatory action saves human lives and livelihoods already makes a case for investing in it. But it's worth stressing how much acting early makes financial sense, too. Since 2017, FAO has been collecting empirical evidence to showcase the importance of anticipatory action. These studies, which have been conducted from the Sudan to the Philippines, show that every USD 1 invested can create a return for farming families of more than USD 7 in avoided losses and added benefits. But the benefits of these interventions go beyond the monetary realm. Speaking to individuals, community leaders and government partners, FAO has also found that these interventions can curb food insecurity, support resilience efforts and provide a more dignified way of approaching humanitarian aid.

Four types of crisis countries

FAO's anticipatory actions have prepared farming families for widely different circumstances and contexts. But, overall, they take place in four types of countries:

1



protracted crisis countries
facing additional hazards

2



countries facing intense
climate extremes

3



countries with
human-induced crises

4



countries facing crisis from threats
to plant and animal health



Anticipatory action in context

The Philippines

In the Philippines, a country that faces major natural hazards such as typhoons and drought on a regular basis, FAO has been working with the Government and other partners to make anticipatory action a central part of the way the country manages disaster risk – in other words, to institutionalize the practice of acting early ahead of crises. In its 2018–2019 action in Mindanao, FAO supported families caught between escalating local conflict and a looming El Niño-induced drought.

People received vegetable gardening kits for their backyards and small community-run poultry farms set up close to evacuation centres. Both provided families with nutritious food before they were cut off from their farmland. Those who did still have access to their rice paddies received drought-resistant rice seeds ahead of the dry spell, so they could plant, after having lost their crops and seeds in two previous droughts. In all, Mindanao farmers received USD 4.4 in benefits and avoided losses for every dollar FAO invested.

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“With FAO’s help, every two weeks I harvest chillies, okra and eggplant. I’m saving for the first time, because I don’t buy vegetables at the market. Instead, I make money! I have eggs and vegetables and now I can buy fruits and medicine for myself and for my baby.”

Tintin Sulaiman, The Philippines

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Colombia

FAO's anticipatory action in Colombia was similar to that in the Philippines but tailored to a very different context. Here, FAO used data from the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Refugee Agency, and the Government to anticipate rising migration flows from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the border region with Colombia. FAO rightly foresaw that communities on the Colombia side would not be able to provide enough food to the growing number of people fleeing or returning from abroad. Even before the influx of new people,

many communities in the area were already struggling to produce in extreme weather and drought conditions. To boost cohesion between newcomers and locals, FAO not only provided vulnerable families with seeds and tools, but also encouraged them to work together on training plots, where they learned climate-smart farming techniques and harvested the fruits of their collective labour. FAO also organized veterinary care and animal feed to protect the health of livestock during drought, which are the main source of income for many families in the area.

“

“We are learning to live together, cultivating together in the Community Production Centre. Agriculture helped me to have a roof over my head. And in spite of everything, being here is a relief. The project has been a breath of fresh air.”

Alina Rieta, Colombia

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The Sudan

For protracted crisis countries, the Sudan is a good example of the added value of anticipatory action. The Sudan is one of the driest countries in Africa, with erratic rainfall from June to October, on which most agricultural production depends. Extreme years, where rainfall is either heavy or below-average, are becoming more common than average years. It makes life very difficult and unpredictable for the 70 percent of rural people who rely on traditional rainfed agriculture for their food and income. Against this backdrop, the country has faced socio-economic and political crises. Climatic events usually compound these existing vulnerabilities.

During one particularly bad rainy season, the early warning system was triggered and started to raise the alarm about worrying signs in Kassala. Two indicators – unusual livestock movement and extended

dry spells – rose above key thresholds. Then, from September to October, the price of sorghum had risen above the annual average. FAO acted quickly to protect agropastoralists and targeted 30 000 animals through livestock health kits, fodder and veterinary care. For every USD 1 invested, farming families had a return of USD 6.6 in avoided losses and added benefits.

The Sudan continues to face persistently high levels of acute malnutrition and stunting, which constitute a significant public health problem. Milk and meat, saved from these animals, is vital to improve nutrition. Well-nourished animals produce lots of milk full of high-quality protein, fatty acids and micronutrients. Just half a litre a day gives a five-year-old child 25 percent of the calories and 65 percent of the protein they need for healthy growth and development.

Final boundary between the Sudan and South Sudan has not yet been determined.

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“With this help, our livestock were healthy and happy and made more milk. We could feed the children and ourselves, and sometimes we provided our neighbours with milk.”

Khaldia Mohammed Ibrahim, the Sudan

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Funding a more resilient future

Since 2016, FAO funded the bulk of its anticipatory action work through the Organization's Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities – specifically its Anticipatory Action Window that makes funds available when signs point towards a looming crisis. This flexible and readily available financing allows FAO to act rapidly when alarm thresholds are crossed and has been crucial for the success of its early interventions.

In recent years, many have recognized the potential of anticipatory action as a way to link humanitarian and development objectives, by protecting – rather than rebuilding – livelihoods. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, through its Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) set aside USD 140 million for anticipatory action pilot projects around the world between 2021 and 2022. Various governments and other humanitarian agencies have likewise made commitments to fund such projects in the future. In short, the humanitarian community, as a whole, is beginning to shift towards this approach.

And that is allowing for increasingly fast and multifaceted actions. As a case in point, when CERF in July 2020 supported FAO, the World Food Programme and the United Nations Population Fund with USD 2.8 million to act on a flood warning in Bangladesh, the money was released in just four hours – the fastest allocation of emergency funds in United Nations history. This meant the agencies could rapidly join the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society in a coordinated action to protect lives and livelihoods with various kinds of support, an example that will hopefully inspire others.

Most importantly, this shift towards flexible financing has tangible impacts on people's lives, both in the short and the long term. In Bangladesh and beyond, empirical evidence has shown that people who receive timely aid cope better with the shocks that threaten their lives and livelihoods: they are less likely to skip meals, sell off assets or take out loans to cover essential items, all of which are indicators of resilience.



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What's more, many receive agricultural training and tools tailored to the climate and hazards they are most likely to encounter, which makes their small farming operation less vulnerable to hazards for years to come. All of these factors – the ability to stay healthy throughout a shock, hold on to assets and know how to properly prepare – create cascading benefits that add up over time. After all, a family who can maintain their nutrition, production and financial security throughout one shock is better positioned to face the next.

Ultimately, by shifting the focus from response to livelihood protection, anticipatory action provides a chance to invest in resilience and the continuation of upward cycles of development. That means it protects not only target families and communities but also existing investments in peace and prosperity.

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“Saving a family’s most valuable asset, such as livestock, before a drought – by providing feed to keep the animals alive and productive – can save the family’s food and income, and help them manage risk. And that has ripple effects: people can stay healthy and keep their kids in school. Some families even expand agriculture production after a crisis, as they don’t have to spend their last money on starting over. Responding to a crisis after it occurs is very different than acting in an anticipatory manner. With anticipatory action, we try to mitigate or even avoid a crisis. Timing in the provision of assistance is critical, as it is a ‘no-regret approach’. But we have shown that even small interventions can make a big difference in people’s lives. Anticipatory action makes sense from a financial point of view too, as preventive measures are less expensive than reactive ones.”

Fatouma Seid,
FAO Representative in Ethiopia

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Scaling up means...

... building stronger links with social protection programmes

Anticipatory actions do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they build on a long-standing collaboration with climate partners, development agencies and governments to support the design and implementation of resilience strategies and programmes that protect farming families and their livelihoods against recurrent hazards. And that is precisely the foundation of successful anticipatory actions that benefit people in the long and the short term.

For one, this work is increasingly looking at how to connect anticipatory action to existing social protection systems. In other words: how to connect short-term projects to longer-term government programmes that protect the most vulnerable in society. Working with beneficiary lists of existing government programmes, for example, can ensure anticipatory actions target families most at risk of losing their livelihoods. The data and experiences collected during anticipatory actions, in turn, can be used to make these programmes stronger and more responsive to people's needs.

Likewise, longer-term development investments in early warning systems can be connected to anticipatory action plans, so both warnings and early protection measures become standard features of these systems. Feedback from anticipatory actions and beneficiaries can help others understand things like: was the risk assessed correctly and communicated properly?

... making emergency programming more equitable

Simply acting early does not guarantee that all benefit equally from anticipatory actions. That is why agencies and governments alike need to actively strive to be inclusive in all their efforts. Inclusive programming must also be conflict-sensitive to avoid doing harm and look for opportunities to contribute to peace. This is particularly important for anticipatory action, which aims to shield the most vulnerable people by saving their lives and livelihoods.

An inclusive approach to anticipatory action will have a nuanced and context-specific understanding of the ways inequality impacts vulnerability and resilience. Working in this way means working with communities to understand how intersecting social categories, such as gender, age, nationality, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity and physical abilities, can be included and benefit from these systems. In short, inclusive anticipatory action must ensure that the most vulnerable have an active voice at the decision-making table and can tailor all aspects of the programme to address their specific needs and priorities.

Vulnerable people and families must be at the centre of our efforts. After all, they are not just the ones who are affected – they are also the first line responders. They have at once the highest stakes and the most detailed knowledge of their needs in times of crises. That's why FAO strives to listen to farming families and understand what kinds of support will do the most to help them, their animals and communities weather a storm and come out stronger on the other end.



Saving livelihoods saves lives

FAO's anticipatory action approach uses risk analysis and forecasts to trigger interventions before a crisis escalates into a humanitarian emergency, and is made possible through the financial support of the Government of Belgium, the European Union, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida.

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