An approach that works: how anticipatory action delivers impacts

In 2015, two projects explored whether it was possible to provide humanitarian support in anticipation of predictable hazards. Focusing on floods in Togo and Uganda, these pilots – for an approach then known as forecast-based financing – sought to test whether acting based on a forecast reduced the impacts of a hazard.

In this approach – now widely known as anticipatory action – forecasts are used to trigger the release of funds that were traditionally only available post-disaster; these funds are then used to undertake pre-agreed humanitarian actions – before the hazard strikes – to reduce the expected humanitarian impacts.

Ten years later, anticipatory action is an established part of the disaster-risk-management cycle in many countries, with 248 million US dollars in pre-agreed financing available in 2024 (**Anticipation Hub 2025**). Throughout this period, practitioners, governments and researchers have been evaluating the effectiveness of this approach, in terms of its positive impacts on people's lives, livelihoods, dignity and resilience to future hazards; many studies have also assessed the cost-effectiveness of this approach, compared to post-hazard support.

This briefing presents evidence of these impacts, taken from anticipatory action activations[1] in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as several activations ahead of El Niño-induced hazards in 2023–2024. While only representing a small sample of the growing number of impact studies and evaluations available, these examples demonstrate that anticipatory action can and does make a tangible difference to the lives of people who face recurring and, very often, worsening hazards.

"This evidence shows that anticipatory action pays off: not just financially, but in real terms for people's food security and resilience."

Alexis Vallejo Mancero, monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning specialist, FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

Registering beneficiaries of multipurpose cash transfers in Somali region, Ethiopia. © Ethiopian Red Cross Society

Early warnings lead to timely action in Bangladesh

Disseminating early warnings to at-risk communities is one of the commonest types of anticipatory action (**Ibid.**), but these are only effective if people can act upon them. Evidence from Bangladesh demonstrates the importance of warnings being delivered in time and in a suitable format (Box 1).

Save the Children delivered early warnings in Chilmari and Ulipur, northern Bangladesh, ahead of the El Niño-driven drought and heat waves in 2023–2024. A post-impact assessment study revealed that, upon receiving a warning, many people acted to reduce the impacts of these hazards (**Save the Children and RIMES 2025**). In the agricultural sector, for example, over 98 per cent of those surveyed increased the frequency with which they irrigated their crops ahead of the drought's peak; over 97 per cent acted ahead of the heat wave, for example keeping animals in shaded areas or providing extra drinking water.[2]

1 An activation refers to the trigger thresholds for a hazard being reached, the pre-agreed funding being released, and the pre-agreed actions being delivered.
2 Starting such measures before a heat wave reaches its peak is likely to lessen the overall effects on animals.

Box 1. Local-language early warnings

If communities are to act upon warnings, it is essential that they understand them. In the Chottogram Hill Tracts, south-eastern Bangladesh, an anticipatory action model[3] provides warnings of monsoon-driven landslides translated into three local languages: Chak, Marma and Tripura.

In May and August 2025, local-language warnings reached more than 45,400 households ahead of landslides – almost 19 per cent of the region's total population – meaning families could move promptly to safe spaces and had time to secure their essential household assets. "Before this project, people often didn't understand government warnings," said Chai Hla Thoai Marma, a member of the disaster management committee in Dungri Headman Para village. "Now, with messages in our language… we can act quickly to protect our families, children and assets."

Warning communities of landslide risks in Bangladesh.
© Save the Children

Anticipatory action in the agriculture sector delivers value for money ahead of El Niño

Ahead of the 2023–2024 El Niño, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) implemented anticipatory actions in 24 countries. These interventions, which included cash-based transfers, the distribution of agricultural inputs and livestock-support packages (among others), reached 1.7 million people ahead of cyclones, droughts and floods linked to El Niño **(FAO 2025)**.

After these activations, FAO conducted return-on-investment calculations, based on household surveys among the communities who benefitted. These were made by determining the value of immediate avoided losses and added benefits delivered through the anticipatory actions – for example, decreased animal mortality or increased crop production – and comparing these figures with the costs of the action **(Ibid.)**.

The results show that for every US dollar invested in anticipatory action, the return on investment, in terms of benefits and avoided losses, was up to three dollars.[4] In Honduras, for example, anticipatory actions enabled farmers to achieve maize yields 40 per cent higher than those for control groups; the early delivery of seeds, feed and training raised milk yields by 0.25 litres per cow per day, improving food access, nutrition and household resilience. This is in line with other studies that demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of anticipatory action ahead of several different hazards **(FAO, OCHA and WFP 2025)**.

"With the voucher, I can choose what is most important for my family and my farm. This time, I was able to buy quality seeds for my field, giving me hope to continue planting despite the drought."

Saugineta Félix Vasco, farmer and project beneficiary, Mozambique

Sustaining people's livelihoods through drought in Ethiopia

In late 2024, forecasts indicated that La Niña conditions were likely to bring another drought to southern and south-eastern Ethiopia. In the agropastoral regions of Oromia and Somalia, livestock and small-scale farmers were still recovering from consecutive droughts during 2020–2022, leaving many families highly vulnerable to another failed season.

In response to a call for assistance from the Ethiopian government,[5] the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, supported by the German Red Cross and the German Federal Foreign Office, provided 10,100–11,300 Ethiopian *birr* (approximately 80-90 US dollars) in anticipatory cash to 24,835 households.[6] It also rehabilitated 27 community water points, provided livestock feed to 3,000 households, vaccinated 50,000 animals, and pre-positioned veterinary medicine.

During a mixed-method evaluation in April and May 2025, communities recounted how and why these actions improved their experience, compared to previous droughts.[7] Many had lost all their livestock during the prolonged drought a few years before, leaving them displaced or without stable livelihoods. This time, the anticipatory cash enabled vulnerable households to meet their immediate needs: buying food,

3 This was developed by Save the Children, the Regional Integrated Multi-Hazard Early Warning System for Africa and Asia (RIMES), Young Power in Social Action and ASHIKA, and supported by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.
4 The figures in the study range from 1.36 in El Salvador to 2.98 in Honduras (FAO 2025).
5 The Ethiopian Red Cross Society had already begun anticipatory actions at this point, but the expected scale of the drought's impact meant further support was required.
6 Exchange rate as of November/December 2024: tinyurl.com/39db7rt3
7 During focus group discussions, respondents indicated that the 2024 drought was less severe than those from 2020 to 2022; they indicated it was between the worst they had experienced/could remember (2020–2022) and a normal year.

medicines and other essentials, and paying school fees. Families could also pay down debts, which contributes to their future security by enabling them to request loans again in times of future need.

The evaluation also revealed that, because of the anticipatory support, families with slightly more means were able to buy young animals, raise them and sell them, or buy fuel for water pumps and cultivate food for their animals during the dry season. This amplified the impact of the support: findings from the evaluation indicate that, by supporting those who are marginally better off, anticipatory action can have positive ripple effects throughout a community.

"You came to us when we needed you the most: when we had exhausted our income. Mostly, aid used to come only once we started losing everything, when we got depressed. But you guys, it was like you were living among us and knew about the drought... You guys don't live with us – but how did you know that we needed the money at the perfect moment?"

Omar Mahamad, pastoralist and project beneficiary, Shinile, Ethiopia

Anticipatory cash assistance improves food security in Somalia

In early 2023, forecasts indicated that the rains in Somalia would fail for the fifth consecutive season, with the continuing drought conditions expected to exacerbate food insecurity in many parts of country. To get ahead of a potential crisis, Start Network purchased a drought-insurance policy worth 3.4 million US dollars through African Risk Capacity, allocating a further 1.1 million US dollars[8] from its Start Ready risk pool.

With this funding, three Somali non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – Gargaar Relief and Development Organisation (GREDO), Save Somali Women and Children, and the Peace Action Society Organization for Somalia – and three international NGOs – Oxfam, Save the Children International and World Vision – provided anticipatory cash assistance in Baidoa and Burhakaba districts before the drought's impacts peaked. Each household received 120 US dollars a month between April and July 2023, with over 50,000 people benefitting.[9]

During an evaluation of the activation, 75 per cent of respondents stated that they found this cash assistance very helpful, with positive impacts on their food security. For example, they were able to eat more, and

Famey Kule Abdiyow. © GREDO

to increase the number of meals and/or types of food they ate (**Start Network 2024**). When measured using the Food Consumption Score,[10] there was a 27 per cent reduction in the number of households ranked in the 'poor' category; using the Household Hunger Scale,[11] there was a 41 per cent difference in the number of people reporting 'little or no hunger' (**Ibid.**)[12]. Many households also reported that the cash transfers helped them buy basic household items as the drought progressed, while others were able to repay debts or invest in livelihood activities.

"The prolonged drought severely affected our main sources of food and income. This assistance [cash transfer] helped me to meet most of my household basic needs."

Famey Kule Abdiyow, recipient of cash assistance, Burhakaba, Somalia

Using the evidence to push for more anticipatory action

These examples provide firm evidence that **anticipatory action delivers measurable impacts on people's lives and livelihoods**, and their resilience to future hazards. The testimonies also demonstrate how many at-risk people view anticipatory action positively, indicating it is a more dignified way to provide humanitarian support.

8 Provided in British pounds (£891,800).
9 This was provided in US dollars via mobile money transfer.
10 See: tinyurl.com/es4jntcf
11 See: tinyurl.com/4fa447cf
12 Percentage changes are measured against baseline figures for the region.

The evidence, notably the case study presenting FAO's work ahead of El Niño-related hazards, also shows that anticipatory action can be more cost-effective than post-hazard assistance, in terms of both benefits delivered and losses avoided. This is critical, considering the current global reductions in humanitarian and development financing **(FAO 2025)**.

These are just a few of the growing number of studies that rigorously examine the benefits of anticipatory action; others demonstrate its further positive impacts, such as improving people's health and well-being. And the need for such evidence is growing. For anticipatory action to support more people ahead of forecastable hazards, it needs to expand to more countries and regions, and to be applied ahead of more hazards. This requires additional financing, both to build the systems needed for this approach to be implemented smoothly, and to support the actions when they are implemented. Persuading decision-makers to increase funding for anticipatory action – whether from governments, donors, the private sector or international funds – will require an even larger, more robust and more diverse evidence base to demonstrate the positive impacts that this approach can and does deliver.

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Further evidence and impact studies are available on the Anticipation Hub's website: **tinyurl.com/226uew69**

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