



POLICY BRIEF

TWELVE WAYS TO TAKE ANTICIPATORY ACTION TO SCALE IN CONFLICTS AND RECURRING CRISES

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Key messages

- **In places with conflicts and/or recurrent crises, it is not possible to replicate anticipatory projects that have been successful elsewhere.** Anticipatory action is much harder where there is no pre-crisis normality, where there is no predictable trajectory for any crisis and where it is harder to define obvious triggers in advance.
- **Conflicts affect everything.** They shape how shocks affect people, and also what actions are feasible and who will benefit from any action. In places with conflict, it is essential to ask three questions:
 1. How will the conflict affect the impacts of the forecast shock?
 2. How will the conflict affect plans to respond to the forecasts?
 3. How will the plans affect conflict?
- **Anticipatory action cannot be planned in isolation.** It must be part of an overall strategy of disaster risk management (DRM).
- **Centralised models of anticipatory action, and tying funds to a single set of triggers at national level, are incompatible with the flexibility needed to be context-appropriate** – and responsive to local situations and their windows of opportunity for action.
- **Promoting anticipatory action means supporting everyone's capacity to make their own forward-looking decisions.** Governments and other agencies should not focus solely on implementing their own pre-planned, pre-funded projects.

About this brief

This policy brief draws on five years of research conducted by the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which has aimed to inform policies, practices and investments to support the resilience of dryland communities in Africa and the Middle East.¹ It is one of a series of three policy briefs that draw out the specific policy implications from SPARC research. The other briefs offer learning for conflicts and recurrent crises from SPARC research on the delivery of people-centred early warning systems (EWS) (Gogerty and Levine, 2025a) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) (Gogerty and Levine, 2025b).

The briefs do not attempt to summarise all the existing knowledge and understanding on the topics. They present only the lessons emerging from SPARC research.²

Introduction

The case for forward-looking decision-making in the face of crises, or anticipatory action, does not need restating. Successful models of anticipatory action are coming of age and being taken to scale. However, these models are showing most promise in response to certain kinds of crisis – in particular, short-term disturbances from normality caused by discrete shocks such as floods and extreme temperature events. The same promise has not yet been achieved when the trajectory of crises is longer or less certain, and when crises develop where there are conflicts, and in other places where the difference between normality and crisis is less easily drawn. SPARC research suggests that the models of anticipatory action being used successfully elsewhere might not be the best way of taking anticipatory action to scale in conflicts, protracted crises and in places that experience recurrent crises – what we call the ‘difficult places’ for anticipatory action.

BOX 1. WHO GETS TO DEFINE ‘ANTICIPATORY ACTION’?

Arguments about definitions are rarely useful but it is important to be clear how terms are being used. And sometimes, the use of particular labels has far-reaching consequences.

‘Anticipatory action’ could be used to describe all actions taken in anticipation of shocks or crises. In the aid sector, anticipatory action is usually used narrowly to refer to formal projects implemented by humanitarian agencies (e.g. Anticipation Hub, n.d.; UNDRR, 2024). Many humanitarian agencies define anticipatory action even more narrowly, restricting it to pre-agreed projects financed by specific mechanisms for releasing funds in response to pre-agreed indicators based on crisis forecasts (UNOCHA, 2024; G7, 2022).

The humanitarian definitions exclude the vast majority of forward-looking actions taken in response to the threat of shocks or crises, which are taken by people threatened by crisis themselves and by their governments. They also exclude forward-looking actions taken by development partners such as the World Bank (which also does not use the term to describe its forward-looking actions).³

SPARC research has found that the exclusive humanitarian terminology is constraining shared understanding and collaboration (Nassef et al., 2025). A separate humanitarian terminology does not prevent collaboration or the development of nexus approaches to crises (i.e. combining short- and longer-term analysis in a single coherent strategy) but nor does it help. In this brief, we therefore use ‘anticipatory action’ broadly to refer to actions taken in advance of an anticipated shock or crisis, however they are financed and whether they are implemented by humanitarian or other actors.

¹ The countries covered by the SPARC programme are: Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Uganda and Yemen.

² For other literature on anticipatory action in conflicts and recurring crises, see ‘Further reading’ at the end of this brief.

³ One of the largest-ever financing responses for anticipatory action was in fact by the World Bank in 2020, although the label of ‘anticipatory action’ has not generally been used to describe it. Over \$150 billion was used to support many actions taken by different governments in anticipation of economic hardships as a result of public health measures such as lockdowns and market closures (World Bank, 2022; Gentilini, 2020).

The label of 'anticipatory action' has primarily been used for actions taken in response to threats from hydrological-meteorological ("hydro-met") events, i.e. shocks relating to water and the weather, such as droughts and floods. This too has shaped the paradigm of how anticipatory action mechanisms are best designed, established and implemented.

Anticipatory action has been most effective in response to riverine floods and cyclones in countries such as Bangladesh (e.g. FAO, 2021), Mongolia (e.g. FAO, 2024) and the Philippines (e.g. UNOCHA, 2024). However, anticipatory action has been effective because of a particular set of conditions, as the example of riverine floods shows. When warnings are received from upstream, floods 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 it is feasible to support people through the crisis for which responses have been identified. Success has primarily been achieved where the overall context in which the shocks occur is 'normal' – a functioning state, an economy that remains largely unaffected by a disaster limited in scope and markets that work.

When certain pre-agreed thresholds are met, such as for the severity of the flood or cyclone and the number of people affected, an EWS triggers the swift roll-out of a pre-planned and pre-funded response, such as emergency payments. This model is gradually being taken to scale outside the humanitarian sector, for example where emergency payments are becoming part of a national shock-responsive social protection system. The same model is being copied in the face of more complicated combinations of shocks in much more difficult places, but there are not yet obvious signs that this offers a successful future strategy for mitigating crises (Levine et al., 2023). This brief reflects SPARC's learning on why this is the case and what alternative approaches might be more helpful.

Why conflicts and recurrent crises are difficult places for anticipatory action

Recently, anticipatory action has been attracting more investment in conflict-affected countries. However, the challenge is not simply to persuade donors to fund

anticipatory action in difficult places. Although places with conflict and recurring crises are very diverse, there are several characteristics that they often share, and which make it harder to undertake effective anticipatory actions.⁴

The windows of opportunity are harder to find because there is no pre-crisis normal

Conflicts and recurrent crises usually create a number of overlapping shocks that play out on different, overlapping timelines. Where semi-crisis is permanent, it is harder to identify when to trigger action to mitigate a spike in the crisis, because there is no pre-crisis normality and no clear path along which future scenarios will develop.

Pre-defined triggers are less useful, because data cannot predict or describe crises well

Reliable data tends to be harder to find in difficult places but this is only half the problem. The trajectories of crisis are much less predictable and more locally specific. As a result, even where data exists, it is much less useful in predicting the impacts of crisis, the calendars of crisis and for identifying triggers and windows of opportunity to take action (Howson, 2025).

It is harder to know what to do

It is harder to find solutions that allow people to head off crisis where people are already using every coping strategy possible, and where the spike in crisis may last more than a few months (Levine et al., 2023). Anticipatory action may deliver earlier relief assistance but it may not open up new opportunities for avoiding crisis. This difference is critical. The rationale for anticipatory action is that there are measures that can be taken to avoid or mitigate a crisis, if only action can be taken in time.

It's harder to do anything

If these challenges were not enough, in conflicts and recurrent crises, the functioning of institutions, and particularly state institutions, is usually highly constrained by lack of financial resources, skilled personnel and effective incentive systems. The weak rule of law and contested authority mean that trust is usually low. Mistrust may extend even to warnings and advice offered by state institutions (Gogerty and Levine, 2025a).

4 These characteristics are discussed in more detail in the accompanying paper in this series on early warning (Gogerty and Levine, 2025a) and in Jaime (2024).

Attempts to assist come with greater risks

Conflict is both a cause of crisis and the context in which everything else takes place (Gogerty and Levine, 2025a). There is usually a much weaker framework of law and accepted social norms for regulating contests over resources. Institutional power is often subservient to personalised sources of power and high degrees of inequality and marginalisation. Throwing resources into a contested arena may help people who badly need them – or, if the power dynamics are not well understood, the resources may become the centre of renewed contestation, resulting in elite capture or, worse, an exacerbation of conflict and marginalisation.

BOX 2. A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY: 'DIFFICULT PLACES'

Different terminologies are used to describe places with conflict and recurring crises, for example the World Bank tends to talk of 'situations of fragility, conflict and violence' (FCV), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of 'fragile and conflict-affected states' (FCAS) and earlier humanitarians talked of 'complex political emergencies'. Grouping countries under any of these labels should not imply that they are similar but some difficulties are frequently found in places that suffer from conflicts (Jaime, 2024; Gogerty and Levine, 2025a). We do not want to enter arguments about terminology, and so we will talk about the challenges of 'difficult places' or 'conflicts and recurrent crises', because violence and insecurity, and the repeated nature of crises, significantly affect the possibilities for anticipatory action.

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 relatively independent humanitarian sector has often developed in such countries, driven partly by humanitarian principles, such as maintaining neutrality in a conflict, especially where the government is a party to that conflict, and by widespread weak institutional capacity and low levels of state trust and accountability.

The humanitarian sector also tends to manage its anticipatory action mechanisms independently, for example as a UN-managed operation within the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). In order to avoid politicisation of aid and to ensure rapid response, such funds are often linked to pre-agreed hydro-met ('scientific') triggers such as weather forecasts and water-stress indices. Funds are then spent on pre-determined response proposals. Tying a response to a shock warning in this way can work well where crises are caused by single shocks and in countries where the state takes responsibility for such mechanisms because the nature of the shock demands a large-scale, discrete response. It has proved more problematic in 'wicked crises' in difficult places, where crises develop from multiple shocks, where shock warnings are local and unpredictable, where the shocks are related to conflict and where there is no clear pre-crisis situation.

SPARC has found that local actors are active in responding to shock forecasts, although without using the term 'anticipatory action' (Levine et al., 2023; Nassef et al., 2025). They can be more effective because they can use their knowledge of the local situation and how crises develop, instead of being tied to pre-defined triggers at national level (Derbyshire et al., 2024; see also Howson, 2025). Local understanding and flexibility allows them to work on different timetables for different kinds of interventions (Nassef et al., 2025). They can seamlessly blend actions that a humanitarian would call 'anticipatory action' (responding on a short timeline to a specific forecast) with longer-term DRR measures so that the two support each other – unlike in the formal aid sector.

Taking anticipatory action to scale in conflicts and recurrent crises

Scaling up anticipatory action in difficult places requires balancing a chain of trade-offs. Action is needed at scale, while at the same time it must have the local flexibility to be context-appropriate. Financing must ensure speed but the need for flexibility must not undermine the principle that resources are used where they are most needed and are not captured by those with most power or favoured by state policies. Priority by need and not politics must be maintained while integrating anticipatory action within a coherent DRR strategy that requires supporting state systems.

Even before the recent cuts to the aid sector, there were never enough resources to respond to all the acute needs in crises in these most difficult places. Although the logic of anticipatory action is widely accepted, it remains difficult to justify using scarce humanitarian resources to address potential future needs when existing acute needs are going unmet. It is highly unlikely that anticipatory humanitarian action of the type described will ever command anything more than a small amount of humanitarian funds which themselves are highly restricted. This is not due to a weakness in the case for anticipatory action but is simply a reflection of reality. If anticipatory action is confined to a model designed to provide resources for implementing discrete humanitarian projects before crises develop, it can never hope to achieve the scale required to make a significant difference. This is not to accept defeat. More opportunities and more resources become available when the essential principle of forward-looking decision-making and response to forecast is integrated into a wider DRM and nexus⁵ strategy.

A wider vision for anticipatory action

The challenges of taking anticipatory action to scale in conflicts and recurrent crises, with weak institutional capacities, widespread lack of resources for state functioning and a difficult enabling environment, cannot be met if thinking about anticipatory action is reduced to an ad hoc humanitarian stand-alone. Promoting anticipatory action cannot mean supporting only one specific model. All forms of forward-looking (anticipatory) decision-making need encouragement and support. It is more than obvious that forward-looking decision-making is needed by governments at all levels, by providers of services, by businesses – and most importantly of all by the individuals, families and communities threatened by a looming crisis or spikes in existing crises.

The role of any agency trying to support ‘forward-looking decision-making’ is to support everyone’s capacity to make their own forward-looking decisions. If their concern is restricted to decisions

about their own projects, as is almost always the case currently,⁶ then it will not be possible to achieve meaningful impact at scale, nor to create an overall strategy for reducing people’s exposure and vulnerabilities to risk.

Increased funding for anticipatory action may be important, but that is not an issue that we treat in this brief. Much greater scale can be achieved if agencies working on anticipatory action take the role of catalysts and facilitators of anticipatory actions, acting as more than just implementers of pre-planned, pre-funded projects.

Twelve 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 and recurrent crises. Much else has been written by others,⁷ and much more remains to be analysed and written. The recommendations below have emerged from specific research projects conducted by SPARC over the past five years. They are offered not as a blueprint but as SPARC’s contribution to a debate that we hope will continue to advance over many years.

1. ‘Nothing about conflict without conflict’

If crises threaten in places where there are conflicts, then the conflict must be part of the analysis at every stage. It creates other shocks that interact with the hydro-met shocks that national anticipatory action and EWS tend to focus on; it shapes the vulnerability of those threatened by the shock and those they rely on for support; and it determines what is possible to implement and with whom to partner. More must also be invested in exploring how anticipatory action can be used to protect people from conflict, such as by responding to the signs that people recognise locally when surges in violence threaten (Davies et al., 2024). Models of anticipatory action from peaceful places cannot simply be transplanted into conflicts.

5 The ‘nexus’ approach is a label used to describe the integration of emergency or humanitarian responses within a wider long-term strategy for development, investment and service delivery. It is sometimes also used to include conflict-management and peace-building efforts (‘the triple nexus’).

6 There are several reasons why agencies focus narrowly on their own activities, including the current accountability systems in the aid sector and inter-agency competition for resources.

7 See www.anticipation-hub.org for a selection of resources on anticipatory action.

2. Anticipatory action should be part of an overall DRM strategy

In conflict and recurrent crises, people are already living so near to the edge that it is difficult to find opportunities that can be opened by anticipatory action. Those opportunities need to be built first and the systems that support them need to be strengthened. This work, under labels such as DRR, resilience building or risk-informed development (RID) (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2019), is often the foundation for anticipatory action. Investments are needed in resilient livelihoods and systems building, for example. These all need to be planned in a single coherent strategy. The risk that humanitarian action will undermine long-term structures is also present when it is anticipatory. This reinforces the need for anticipatory action to be part of an overall disaster risk management strategy in which humanitarian actors play a part, but which does not sit in their own silo (Balfour and Levine, 2025; Mohammed et al., 2024; Gogerty and Levine, 2025b).

3. Support people's own anticipatory actions, 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, including 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 and their risk tolerance (Weingärtner et al., 2022). It is impossible to design context-specific responses for different people in a centralised way (Levine and Pain, 2024). We must think of supporting people's own anticipatory actions rather than only about 'doing anticipatory action programming'. This does not mean making people responsible on their own for what happens: accountability remains with governments and others. It does, though, mean accepting that support should be given without trying to decide for everyone what they should do. This requires those working on anticipatory action to give up control. This often proves psychologically difficult for individuals and culturally difficult for organisations. It also creates practical challenges around accountability. These processes will therefore need significant support from senior management and donors.

4. Think diversity, not blueprints

Heterogeneity means that we cannot have one approach even in a single country. Different activities need to be undertaken (by people themselves and by those supporting them) sometimes even in neighbouring districts within a country (Weingärtner et al., 2022; Nassef et al., 2025). 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.

5. Avoid linking the release of all funds to a single centralised mechanism

Different places need different responses, as discussed above. The response calendars set by windows of opportunity for anticipatory support can also vary between different population groups and places.⁸ It makes no sense to link funding mechanisms for anticipatory action to a single set of triggers at national level for interventions of all kinds (Derbyshire et al., 2024).

6. Flexibility in response is also essential

Situations change very quickly and unpredictably, especially in difficult places where multiple shocks interact. Building anticipatory action around predetermined projects may seem the best way to avoid delays but it is unlikely to lead to appropriate responses in difficult places. It is essential to have a plan – but dangerous to stick to it. Flexibility is needed to adapt plans as the situation, and predictions, change.

7. Anticipation should be incorporated into everything

It is not enough to have a sub-set of humanitarian projects that are 'anticipatory'. All humanitarian action needs to be forward-thinking – and so does the action of every other actor, state or non-state, whether their focus is 'development' more generally, climate change or service provision. Anticipatory action protocols may help by providing examples for others to follow but, for them to bring about change, success must be managed for and measured in a different way. The contractual objectives should not be simply how many anticipatory projects are run,

⁸ See Nassef et al. (2025), section 2.4 for an example of three timelines from droughts in Mali.

nor even the impact of those projects. The measure of success is how much more forward-looking action emerges as a result of support.

8. Anticipatory action is as susceptible as everything else to elite capture

Many SPARC research projects have highlighted the prevalence of elite capture (Bedelian and Levine, 2025). Anticipatory action is no different. Unless deliberate efforts are made to be inclusive, the people with least power tend to get left out of support. This applies even to the provision of relevant information (Gogerty and Levine, 2025a). Anticipatory action analysis has to be based on an understanding of power relations, and not merely technical parameters (e.g. rainfall or agriculture). The need to tailor anticipatory action to meet the different needs of men and women is widely acknowledged (Plan International, 2024), but understanding what this should look like in different places is a task ahead of us.

9. Consider 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 greater 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 pre-approved 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!

10. 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 early warning, trust in the plan, trust in the recommendations of different actors (Gogerty and Levine, 2025a; Nassef et al., 2025). Building trust takes time, especially with those on the wrong end of a power imbalance. A long-term strategy for trust-building is essential preparatory work for anticipatory action – it can be thought of as the anticipatory action for enabling anticipatory action.

11. 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 but they 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 state and citizens and what is local (Nassef et al., 2025). They can also provide a bridge for independent aid actors with both local communities and state structures. They should be given even more attention than usual in conflicts and recurrent crises.

12. 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 countries has found that, even with hindsight, it is not always possible to see what could have been done – by government, aid agencies or people themselves – to avoid crisis (Levine et al., 2023; Nassef et al., 2025). Anticipatory action cannot continue to support people throughout protracted crises (Easton-Calabria, 2024). We have to recognise the limits of what anticipatory action can achieve at scale in crises of unpredictable duration. 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 when decision-making is anticipatory. Anticipation should not be used to replace other quality demands: it just adds one more.

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agropastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, nongovernmental organisations, local and national governments and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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