



Anticipatory action to mitigate drought-induced crises: Tracking drought impacts and aid responses in Kenya and Somalia, 2020-2022¹

Summary

Ten years on from the 2012 [Dangerous Delay report](#) that examined the costs of late response to the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa, millions of people in the Horn of Africa once again face hunger and famine.

Communities in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) of Kenya and Somalia are experiencing a devastating drought after three consecutive poor rainy seasons. Experts agree that, unlike the response to drought in 2017, the aid system has largely failed to act early enough and at scale to prevent the current crisis.

This brief summarises lessons and insights from a [study by the Centre for Humanitarian Change](#) on anticipatory action (AA) to mitigate drought impacts in Kenya and Somalia.

It focuses on AA², looking at how actors used climate forecasts and projections of food security conditions to prevent or mitigate negative impacts of drought on people's lives. It explores the barriers and enablers for AA and recommends ways to better support such action in future. It also served as a background paper for the recent ['dangerous delay 2' report](#).



¹ This brief summarises a report prepared by the Centre for Humanitarian Change for the Jameel Observatory for Food Security Early Action and its partners Save the Children UK and the University of Edinburgh Global Academy on Agriculture and Food Systems. Image credit: Joyce Maxwell/CHC

² According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), anticipatory action is a set of actions "taken in advance of a crisis, before either the shock or its peak impact."

Conclusions

Early warning forecasts and projections have improved and are considered credible

Stakeholders reported that a large amount of data for forecasting and projecting is collected, collated and used for early warning purposes. This is increasingly analysed using common analytical frameworks. Analysis is trusted, well-communicated and used in decision making, particularly within the humanitarian cycle. Analysis and related decision making is gradually being owned and led by governments, and there is evidence of local non-governmental and community participation and inclusive decision making in both countries.

Forecasts and projections platforms are using technology, learning and technical improvements to increase the confidence in their analysis. The increasing availability of data and analysis is allowing greater capacity to triangulate and provide more nuanced pictures of the potential impacts of climate shocks on livelihoods.

Informal/community-level early warning systems, based on localised, more qualitative information, work well in many areas. However, there is a persistent disconnect between these systems and more formally recognised systems. Despite good initiatives by climate and early warning institutions, two-way communication of information between communities and formal early warning systems, remains a challenge.

Despite credible analysis, the timing to trigger anticipatory action is fraught with difficulties

In both countries, climatic seasons are a fundamental element of each livelihood system and strongly influence food, nutrition, and public health outcomes, including the risk of famine. The review suggests that AA could have been triggered for Somalia as early as August/September 2020 when two consecutive below average rainfall seasons were forecasted, reinforced by a FEWS NET alert from August 2020. From this point until just after the March-May 2021 rains there were multiple reinforcing forecasts, alerts and projections that increased the confidence in taking a “no regrets” approach to triggering AA. For Kenya, the earliest possible date for AA was probably January/February 2021.

Challenges remain to interpret and use early warning analysis to trigger anticipatory action

Early warning-early action (EW-EA) gaps remain a significant barrier. This is related to early action systems issues but also to the ways that early warning systems work. There is inherent uncertainty for triggering anticipatory action in complex contexts where climate shocks are just one variable of how livelihoods systems are adapting and transforming.

Currently, early warning systems tend to use a linear perspective of a drought being an event with three stages – before, during and after, resulting in a continuum model and typologies of responses progressing from AA to early response, to response and to early recovery. For people directly experiencing shocks, coping with drought is not an event that begins and ends. Local responses to the current drought are conditioned by the history of their responses to previous shocks and will play a significant part in how to cope with future shocks. This study found that EW-EA gaps are much reduced at the local level, with the principal barriers being capacity and resources. The formal system is beginning to apply whole system approaches to AA across the humanitarian - development nexus but interviewees could offer little clarity on the vision for AA, further exacerbating EW-AA gaps.

Current early warning systems tend to concentrate on the impact of climate shocks on rural populations and food security elements such as markets, production, access to food and food consumption. Thus, more complex issues of social networks, intra-household factors, health, nutrition, WASH, urban populations, gender and inclusion tend to get downplayed. Decision makers find it difficult to anticipate more complex shock impacts and instead focus disproportionately on food security interventions.

Uncertainty about the interpretation of early warning analysis also delays action. More data, more sophisticated analysis and more analytical frameworks increase understanding of the dynamics of the crisis but also increase the gaps between analysis and decision makers’ abilities to make appropriate decisions. More data and analysis also increase the possibility for divergence in forecasts and projections, reportedly resulting in less understanding, confidence and use of the analysis.

Key conclusions

1. Early warning forecasts and projections have improved and are considered credible
2. Despite the credible analysis, the timing to trigger anticipatory action is fraught with difficulties
3. Challenges remain to interpret and use early warning analysis to trigger anticipatory action
4. There are capacities and resources for AA in local and informal systems
5. Small scale forecast-based financing has demonstrated impact but is not widely available
6. Actions by most stakeholders were more appropriate to relieve drought impacts than to protect livelihoods and strengthen systems.

Regular updates are seen as both increasing and decreasing uncertainty. On one hand, the complexity and volatility of the context demands regular updates and on the other, focusing too much on short-term changes can confuse longer-term decision making.

There are capacities and resources for AA in local and informal systems but gaps in operationalising system-wide thinking remain

Approaches where implementers of AA worked closely with local communities were shown as being instrumental in addressing food insecurity, livestock loss, and other negative impacts on livelihoods. Deteriorating conditions were picked up earlier and influenced decision making in social networks, local government and non-governmental agencies. Most respondents in Somalia reported that community-based systems were fastest to respond to a crisis. Informal social networks and community-based systems continue to be the first to act and they are some of the few examples of genuine anticipatory action. Informal coping mechanisms have played a critical role in alleviating challenges faced by households in Somalia. Local NGOs and local government have played a strong role in anticipatory action in this drought across both countries. While there are examples of *strategies* to link up community and social network-led mechanisms for mobilising resources and taking anticipatory action with formal response systems, there is limited evidence of this in *practice*.

Small scale forecast-based financing has demonstrated impact but is not widely available

Evidence shows that early interventions using forecast-based financing have an immediate and significant return on investment. Several studies have confirmed the value of triggering funding based on a forward projection of disaster conditions to support action ahead of a crisis. However, in this region, the most common source of financing for AA in response to early warning is the contribution from community

members. Based on our interviews, other stakeholders (government and NGOs) either did not have access to dedicated funds for AA or the funds they did have were quickly exhausted. Response actors report limited flexibility to repurpose funds. Although donors, the UN and NGOs do seem willing to divert existing funding in both countries, the bureaucracy around this is still too heavy.

There are many examples of pre-positioned resources for drought, including contingency funds and crisis modifiers, but in most cases the trigger for release is the *emergency, not forecasts*. The AA pilot funded by the Central Emergency Response Fund and the World Bank in Somalia provides some important learning on developing AA systems, particularly in agreeing on what the funding aims to do and how to define appropriate, context-specific action.

Actions by most stakeholders were more appropriate to relieve drought impacts than to protect livelihoods and strengthen systems

Despite the demonstrated value of forecasts to predict heightened risk of food security crises and the clear advantages of AA, decision making and triggers are still linked to emergency response. AA is still a relatively new concept, and many stakeholders were more comfortable talking about early action systems or preparedness than forecast-based or anticipatory action. In Somalia, the Government and humanitarian system's predominant strategy for action is highly shock responsive and only acts when a crisis has emerged and funding becomes available. There is evidence that models for AA are being developed and institutionalised in both countries, but the experience of the pilots for these models was mixed in 2020–22.

Existing systems for EW-EA are more orientated towards triggering and coordinating emergency response. Stakeholders reported that AA mechanisms in different organisations operate in silos and there is a need for greater harmonisation and coordination.

The Ending Drought Emergency programme in Kenya includes frameworks to enable earlier drought response. However, even this is still reactive and has not yet begun to address systems for earlier and more proactive action including AA. Despite these challenges, it is one of the few examples of a systems approach to enable action to reduce the impacts of predictable climate shocks. In Somalia, the building blocks for a systems approach are gradually being constructed and brought together but most anticipatory action takes place within the informal system.

Local community representatives in Kenya felt the response to the current drought was less effective than before, mainly due to problems of transparency and accountability. Opaque governance of the response and lack of clarity on who is accountable for where, how and by whom the funds are used undermine confidence in the systems. In both countries, responses were seen to be primarily reactive rather than proactive with a focus on relieving immediate food- and water-related stress in affected geographical regions. In some programmes in Somalia, targeting has improved and is based on a transparent, collaborative selection process.

Stakeholders are still struggling to understand what action is appropriate in anticipation of a crisis. This is further complicated when the food security crisis is caused by multiple shocks and some populations are facing crisis levels of food insecurity before a crisis is forecast. Aid organisations in Kenya felt that they had responded early to the National Drought Management Authority bulletins and seasonal forecasts, but the action taken was to relieve escalating drought impacts. There have been several initiatives to strengthen shock-responsive social protection in both countries and these have huge potential for AA. However, stakeholders felt this was “too little, too late” in contrast to 2016–17, when early action was thought to have prevented a deterioration into emergency for many households.

Recommendations

Develop a vision for AA in different contexts

Informants said that AA means responding earlier in anticipation of future impacts of a crisis but were not clear how AA related to a continuum response model including disaster risk reduction, early action, early response and response. As a result, it was difficult to find

examples of AA in the formal system, except for the CERF pilot.

In contrast, the informal community-based system of AA was seen to be anticipatory, albeit with many challenges. One of the most significant challenges is the link between formal Governmental and aid systems and informal community-based systems and the roles of local and informal actors in shaping decision-making. This lack of a shared vision on the objectives of AA is a missed opportunity to realise the full value, and hopes, of using AA approaches.

Uncertainty on three issues causes this problem:

1. How should we address early warning-early action gaps? Despite improvements in forecasting, actors, particularly at national and global levels, still struggle to trigger appropriate and earlier actions at the required scale and over a longer duration.
2. What are the most appropriate actions to be taken, for whom, to mitigate which negative impacts of a crisis, and when is it best to do this? How big, in terms of severity and magnitude and type of crisis, should the impending crisis be to trigger AA? There is confusion on whether AA is the first step in a continuum of response followed by early action, early response and response. A complementary view is that AA constitutes forward-looking actions to anticipate a future escalation of food insecurity and malnutrition, as opposed to early anticipation of a crisis, and can take place at any stage of a crisis.
3. Where does AA fit into international aid and crisis response systems and in local systems? Respondents differed on where AA fits in the nexus between humanitarian response and development programming, and how it best links to support less formal community-based system and networks. Is it more of a development responsibility, similar to disaster risk reduction? Is it part of resilience building? Is it a humanitarian action, similar to early response? Or is it part of all of these? The vision for localisation of AA is still undefined but good small-scale examples of what works are emerging.

The future vision for AA should see it as integral to all parts of formal and informal systems. Currently, there is a tendency to concentrate on project level stand-alone AA pilots.

Key recommendations

1. Develop a common vision and strategy for anticipatory action in different contexts.
2. Integrate anticipatory action into existing formal and informal/community structures and systems.
3. Localise anticipatory action by integrating early warning approaches of informal/community systems into formal systems and better linking local with national/international decision making.
4. Strengthen early warning and prediction analysis by simplifying and standardising triggers for anticipatory action, clarifying which national-level decisions are key to facilitate local-level leadership and decision making, producing more regular updates through real-time monitoring and tools, and strengthening the inclusion of affected communities in decisions on AA.

The answers to the major challenges for AA will be found by considering AA as a feature of all development and humanitarian planning, budgeting, and response, not as a stand-alone structure.

Integrate AA into existing systems and use a nexus framework to define its future vision

The report points to the need to integrate AA into existing formal structures of government, development, resilience and humanitarian programming and to develop better links to and participation of informal/community-based and led systems, thus avoiding creating new structures, new funding streams and new debates on the value and objectives of AA. Having AA as a principle to strengthen the shock responsiveness of all these systems would also allow AA more flexibility to respond more appropriately to many, and any, types of impending crises at the same time and at most stages of a crisis, not just at the beginning of visible crises, such as droughts or floods or locusts, and to many smaller and medium-sized crises.

There is much to gain from ensuring that representatives of informal/community-based AA systems are included in decision making and leadership of formal systems of AA. Much more two-way communication will help formal systems respond earlier and more appropriately and will help local actors respond more appropriately and target some of the most vulnerable.

Localise anticipatory action

Integrate early warning approaches of informal/community systems into formal systems. Regionally, there are several examples where customary climate forecasting systems link with formal early warning systems. Lessons from those projects provide a starting point for the next steps in localisation of early warning. A first step could include strengthening two-way communication between formal and informal

early warning systems to improve the timeliness, targeting and types of actions decisions used.

Better link local and national/international decision making on triggering of appropriately timed, targeted and choice of anticipatory actions.

Experience, knowledge, capacities, and agency to take contextually appropriate AA was found at a local level, from sub-national to community level, and in the informal system. The international system, for the most part, remained divorced from local community decision making at the beginning of the response and is still, to a large extent, operating separately from community-based responses. Decisions about the timing and type of AA that is required should start at the local level and higher levels of decision making should facilitate local-level decision making, adaptability and learning on responding more proactively to the complex, overlapping and continuous effects of climate-related crises on communities and their livelihoods. As the magnitude, duration and severity of the need for AA increase, so the need for AA resources and capacity will increase. Contingency planning with local decision makers can facilitate the gradual scale up of support for the local response and, eventually, joint formal and informal implementation of AA.

Strengthen early warning and prediction analysis

Simplify and standardise formal national and international level triggers for anticipatory action and their communication to decision makers to allow earlier “no regrets” decisions to be made and to increase community-level leadership in decision making.

Clarify which national-level decisions are key to facilitate local-level leadership and decision making about anticipatory action. For example, clarify longer-term issues such as mechanisms for releasing funds, triggering

preparedness actions to mitigate against future shocks and establishment of mechanisms to enable contextual, flexible and adaptive sub-national and local decision making.

Produce more regular updates of food security and nutrition outcome projections through real-time monitoring and tools. As crisis drivers and outcomes are complex and highly dynamic, more real-time analysis of crises is required. Tools such as household economy analysis (HEA) can regularly adjust decision making about food security and livelihoods dynamics and types of actions to be taken, especially at sub-national and local levels. HEA can integrate real-time data to update projected food security and livelihoods outcomes and facilitate triggering for AA.

Considerably strengthen the inclusion and participation of affected communities and local and social networks in decision making about the timing, targeting and type of anticipatory actions to be taken.

Further reading

Centre for Humanitarian Change. 2022. *Anticipatory action to mitigate drought-induced crises: Tracking drought impacts and aid responses in Kenya and Somalia, 2020-2022*. Edinburgh: Jameel Observatory, University of Edinburgh Global Academy on Agriculture and Food Systems and Save the Children. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/2280>

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The Jameel Observatory for Food Security Early Action is an international partnership led by the University of Edinburgh collaborating with the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Save the Children, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and Community Jameel.

Based at ILRI in Nairobi, Kenya, we combine the local knowledge and concerns of communities facing on-the-ground threats of hunger with innovations in data science and humanitarian action; teaming up to devise solutions that can predict, prepare for, and overcome climate-related food security and malnutrition challenges in dryland areas.



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