



Discussion Brief 2

Enablers and blockers for effective anticipatory action against food crises in East African drylands

Anticipatory action (AA) is an increasingly common approach adopted by humanitarian and development stakeholders to help stem the negative outcomes of a projected crisis. By incorporating solutions-focused activities, utilising innovations, and working in partnership, well-rounded and considered anticipatory action can be highly effective at mitigating the worst effects of a crisis.

However, several factors – such as communication, timing, geographic location, crisis severity, and type of impacts – influence the success of anticipatory action. It is vital to recognise and understand these ‘blockers’ and ‘enablers’ at local and national levels and to take steps to enhance or mitigate them.

They take many forms:

While existing food security projections, such as Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analyses, are helpful in monitoring for broad and slow-moving humanitarian crisis, they are less useful for triggering anticipatory action.

Food insecurity can change quickly and can vary dramatically across space. Anticipatory actions need to operate at these same resolutions, which are much higher than the spatial and temporal resolution of existing food insecurity projections.

Timing is a critical issue. For example, funding requests are often raised during a drought season in response to projections that the drought will continue and that conditions will deteriorate further.

But, such requests can take so long to be processed, that resources intended for early action happen after the crisis has arrived and are repurposed for direct relief efforts. Further, the above presupposes that indicators were actually available in time to trigger early actions. In many cases, the process of data collection, processing and transmission to officials is very long and can reduce or entirely deplete the opportunity for early actions.

Finally, the analysis is currently too broad and top line to successfully trigger appropriate actions for local communities. As such, more focus is required on local, socio-economic dynamics and markers.

The challenges are also felt at local levels. People within communities want to help and respond, but they may not know how. They are often left out of processes to develop and apply frameworks put in place by outside agencies and the knowledge and on-the-ground data of local communities is often left out.

Overall, uncertainties around how best to integrate data and knowledge at a local level and the complexity of anticipatory action and the fact that the determining factors/impacts vary between communities make the process even more challenging.

Emerging lessons and action points

Priority learning and action points that emerged from this dialogue include:

First, we must document the timelines of anticipatory action processes, from the initial point of data/indicator acquisition until anticipatory actions are implemented. These timelines can be used to identify barriers that slow the pace of actions.

Second, we need to explore how anticipatory action can be mainstreamed and incorporated within existing policies, frameworks, and strategies; this includes within community systems and initiatives.

Third, socio-economic indicators need to be prioritised alongside bio-physical forecasting models to improve decisions regarding triggers. Tools that assess the vulnerability of households to food security-related shocks, such as household economy analysis (HEA), can both inform forecast models as well as the actions that are implemented in response to a projected crisis.

Fourth, communities have incredible knowledge and agency, and these need to be better harnessed and linked to AA processes. Enhancing local leadership, participation and governance is important to this effort.

Fifth, government leadership and acceptance of anticipatory action is required for it to be effective. Anticipatory action is also complex, which means there is need for national and local capacities, which often do not yet exist.

Sixth, as anticipatory action is integrated into the larger humanitarian ecosystem, cost-benefit analysis will be required to assess where recourses are most effective. Such analysis must account for the fundamental differences between anticipatory actions that aim to reduce the impacts of coming shocks, and humanitarian relief aiming to ease the existing impacts of shocks.

Communities recover from shocks by replacing lost animals with drought or heat tolerant breeds such as these cattle. Photo: Julie Ojango



Questions for research and practice

- Linking indicators - How can we integrate social-economic indicators and information with other community level indicators in a participatory approach?
- Complementary analyses - How can we better incorporate or complement the food security projections with data from local systems and/or HEA?
- How well do current actions align with communities' priorities and can that alignment be improved with local information?
- Mainstreaming early warnings - Can we develop an approach that integrates community-based early warning systems with national ones?
- Outcome funding – Anticipatory actions have different short-term and long-term outcomes than actions that respond to an ongoing crisis. Which approaches to monitoring and assessment can be put in place to facilitate learning across interventions with such different outcomes and timelines?



Conclusions

The main takeaway is the necessity for greater focus and activities at a community level. More focus should be given to local community insights – communities recognise best what they need and when. Further evidence around the effectiveness of anticipatory actions at local level is required. Local data needs to be incorporated into anticipatory action systems – currently, national data is predominantly used in their design. In developing community-focused anticipatory actions, we need to consider their specific capacities and capabilities.

Data is key for developing models that accurately forecast food insecurity and to monitor and improve early actions. Data needs to be better tied to government policies, especially as actors at lower levels often depend on the decisions of actors further up the chain.

Future research needs to look at anticipatory action effects on long-term outcomes rather than just near-term results.

For officials to act, they require more than just data; their decisions need to be facilitated.



In 2022, the Jameel Observatory for Food Security Early Action and partners convened several virtual mini dialogues on priority topics related to the Observatory vision: vulnerable pastoral and agro-pastoral communities in target regions of East Africa are more prepared for and resilient to the effects of evolving environmental shocks and stresses on their food security and nutrition. The aim was to identify priority research, learning and other actions that the Observatory and a wider community of collaborators can tackle.

The mini dialogues followed a similar process, starting with a short framing presentation, group discussion, then short plenary stocktaking. This dialogue on 6 April 2022 was championed by Mohammed Addum of Save the Children UK. Peter Hailey from the Centre for Humanitarian Change provided the framing presentation. This brief was reviewed by Laura Swift and Jo Grace of Save the Children and finalized by Nathan Jensen of the University of Edinburgh

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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.
jameelobservatory.org / info@jameelobservatory.org

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