

LESSON 5:

MOVE TOWARDS ANTICIPATORY ACTION

Humanitarian and development systems must transition from reactive crisis response to proactive, anticipatory risk management to reduce the human and economic toll of drought and make the most cost-efficient use of donor funds.

Most drought responses still begin after communities have already suffered significant losses. Anticipatory action links risk forecasting, preparedness and flexible financing to ensure assistance reaches people before crises peak. Pre-arranged mechanisms – such as crisis modifiers, risk-financing instruments (including parametric insurance) and contingency funds – allow agencies to act early, based on clear triggers, rather than waiting for disaster declarations. These systems (which will require investment) can reduce response times, lower costs and enable communities to protect assets and avoid harmful coping strategies.

Anticipatory approaches must be embedded in wider resilience and adaptation frameworks, integrating humanitarian and development objectives. They work best when underpinned by real-time data, climate and market analysis, and strong institutional linkages between forecasters, decision-makers and local actors. Preparedness requires not only technical systems but also practical arrangements: pre-approved plans, contracts with service providers and community-level communication that translates scientific forecasts into actionable guidance.⁵ Many donors continue to favour interventions that deliver immediate, visible results, making it challenging to articulate and demonstrate the long-term value and impact of anticipatory investments.

Effective anticipatory action requires flexible programming that supports locally led initiatives rather than imposing pre-defined external interventions. Local communities often have the most timely knowledge of risks and appropriate responses. Donor funding allocation should allow more timely interventions, such as early cash transfers, feed provision or targeted livelihood support, which can prevent asset depletion and preserve dignity. Aligning assistance with predictable seasonal hunger periods further maximises impact. Regional coordination and market linkages ensure that food, feed and cash can move quickly – even in times of stress.

⁵ Experts from the Delphi panel noted that anticipatory action remains a critical approach for managing and reducing risks; however, wider donor buy-in is still needed.

Number of documents contributing to the lessons: 70

Average evidence scores of all documents contributing to the lessons: 4

Median evidence strength of documents contributing to the lessons: 80%

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Humanitarian and development actors should integrate anticipatory action into drought preparedness and response strategies, rather than treating it as a separate or pilot approach.
- Donors should increase support for anticipatory action through flexible and pre-arranged financing instruments that can be triggered by early warning indicators and agreed thresholds.
- Humanitarian actors, working with governments and technical agencies, should establish clear, jointly agreed triggers for anticipatory action that are linked to operational plans and financing mechanisms.
- Humanitarian actors and donors should support locally led anticipatory interventions that build on community knowledge, priorities and existing coping strategies.
- Humanitarian actors should invest in practical preparedness measures – including pre-approved response plans, framework agreements with service providers and pre-positioning of assistance – to enable rapid action when triggers are reached.
- Humanitarian and development actors should align anticipatory interventions with predictable seasonal hunger periods to maximise impact and protect livelihoods.
- Humanitarian actors and donors should strengthen regional coordination and market linkages to support anticipatory action in remote, mobile and cross-border contexts.