

A Learning Framework for Anticipatory Action

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Introduction: The motivation behind this tool

This learning framework for anticipatory action (AA) is a tool to help make logical choices about where to try AA next to achieve well-defined learning objectives. The motivation to develop this tool came from asking ourselves two basic questions:

- i. What's our theory of change (i.e., why AA)?
- ii. What remains unknown about AA that we could still discover through further experimentation (i.e., ongoing and new pilots)?

For the first one, we need only refer to the Casement Lecture:

“So—and this is really the only point I am making today—what we need to do is to move from today's approach, where we watch disaster and tragedy build, gradually decide to respond and then mobilize money and organizations to help; to an anticipatory approach where we plan in advance for the next crises, putting the response plans and the money for them in place before they arrive, and releasing the money and mobilizing the response agencies as soon as they are needed. Does that sound like rocket science? No, I don't think so either.” (*Mark Lowcock, Iveagh House, Dublin, Ireland, 23 March 2018*)

For the second one, a passage from an essay by Henry Mintzberg seems to sum it up:

“Theory is insightful when it surprises, when it allows us to see profoundly, imaginatively, unconventionally into phenomena we thought we understood. To quote Will Henry, “What is research, but a blind date with knowledge.” No matter how accepted eventually, theory is of no use unless it initially surprises—that is, changes perceptions. (A professor of mine once said that theories go through three stages: first they're wrong; then they're subversive; finally, they're obvious.)” (*Henry Mintzberg, Developing Theory about the Development of Theory, January 2014*)

Rationale: Learning to make AA scalable and sustainable

To spur change and learning, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) committed to invest up to \$140 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) in a set of *AA pilots*. The pilots aim to:

- Demonstrate how collective and coordinated AA could work at scale;
- And generate proof that, when AA is possible, it is faster, cheaper and more dignified than the traditional response.

Concretely, the pilots involve putting in place a mechanism called an *AA framework* to predetermine who gets how much money to do what based on which signal to catch a problem before it becomes a crisis.

The work done in 2020 in Somalia, Ethiopia and Bangladesh (see Annex 1) proved that collective AA is possible and has an impact. The goal ahead, however, is to make AA scalable and sustainable.

- “Scalable AA” includes –among others- globally increasing the proportion of pre-arranged funding for large-scale AA interventions to predictable problems; expanding the range of shocks whose impact can be predicted and mitigated through AA; diversifying the geographic coverage and types of contexts where AA is applicable; protecting and helping more people before they are struck by a shock or its peak impact.
- “Sustainable AA” includes –among others- transitioning from testing to mainstreaming (i.e., integrating AA into the humanitarian system’s policy, institutional, technical and operational apparatus); materializing political buy-in by governments into the practical uptake and integration of AA within their crisis risk financing and management strategies.

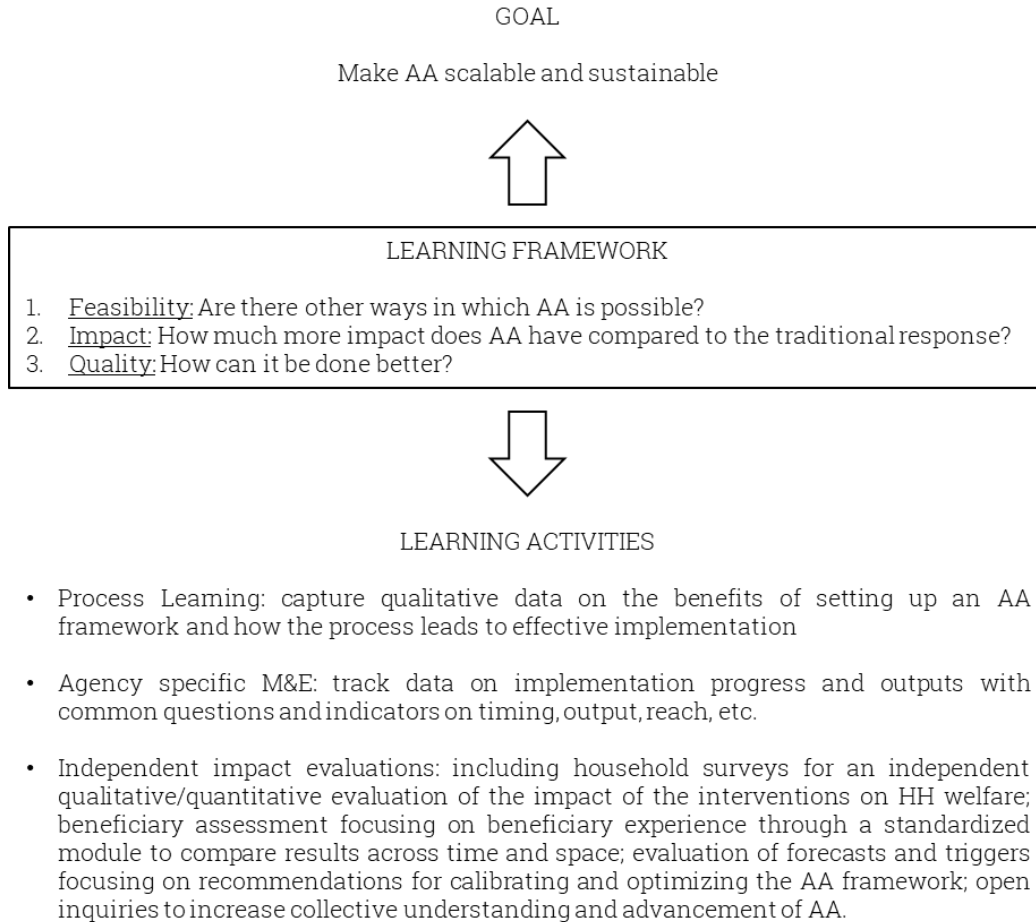
Learning framework

The pilots the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) will launch in 2021¹ will be a steppingstone towards making AA more scalable and sustainable by pursuing answers to three categories of questions:

- i. Feasibility: Are there other ways in which AA is possible?
- ii. Impact: How much more impact does AA have compared to the traditional response?
- iii. Quality: How can it be done better?

Fig.1: Focus and use of the learning framework

¹ OCHA uses the criteria in Annex 3 to help select pilots. The questions in this learning framework can help define the learning objectives for each pilot and, in doing so, establish which questions and evidence could be generated through other means (i.e., instead of or in addition to a pilot, collecting existing evidence or doing additional research).



Within these three categories (AA feasibility, impact and quality), there are questions that, if answered, can help increase the scalability and sustainability of AA (dual goal). These are fairly generic and will need to be contextualized and aligned to the objectives and learning activities of ongoing and new pilots, keeping in mind that:

- Not all questions are indispensable → prioritize and work on the questions we must answer before those that would be good to answer
- A pilot is not always the best way → some questions are best tackled by collecting existing evidence or through research (or a combination of these)
- Not all pilots need to answer all questions → this is a tool, not a set of rules

Feasibility: Are there other ways in which AA is possible?

1. **Applicability to diverse shocks**: e.g., getting to the bottom of the barrel on drought and exploring cyclones, storms, infectious diseases, and other climate related shocks that are

increasing in frequency and could be considered for AA like wildfires and heat stress/ heat waves etc.

2. **Applicability in in different contexts:** e.g., protracted crises (e.g., flood response in refugee camps), transition contexts and developing countries where AA could leverage shock-sensitive social protection systems, DRR, crisis modifiers in development programming, preparedness, etc.
3. **Diversify the geographic coverage:** focus on locations (cities and rural areas), countries, regions that stand to benefit the most from AA; consider transboundary risks (e.g., drought in Ukraine or China that affect food prices in another country).
4. **Compounding risks:** explore feasibility of AA for multiple and compounding risks.
5. **Duration:** AA for longer problems (e.g., plague in Madagascar); or multi-year AA: if an AA framework is activated year after year in a given location, could it deliver different services to eventually [graduate](#) out of the need for humanitarian response? (E.g., Year 1: drought resistant seeds, Year 2: cash for work program or training to help improve irrigation, etc.)
6. **Link to climate action:** AA contributions to climate change dialogue fostering the link to long term development and climate finance opportunities.

Impact: How much more impact does AA have compared to the traditional response?

7. **Impact of different types of interventions:** cash, in-kind support, timing and size of transfers.
8. **Impact of basket of goods provided:** Evaluate if AA has greater impact by reaching more people with less or offering fewer people more; what items/ services should be provided to have the most impact; and, if AA occurs repeatedly in a country, whether the same action or different actions should be taken each time.
9. **Impact for different types of shocks:** fast versus slow onset.
10. **Impact in different contexts:** protracted humanitarian situations, fragile countries, developing countries, cities versus rural, etc.
11. **Impact in different demographics:** socioeconomic, women and girls, ethnicity, etc.

Quality: How can it be done better?

12. **Working with governments** beyond getting political but-in to embed AA in national plans/investments; overcoming obstacles associated to the political economy of AA.
13. **Financing for scale:** aim to reach one or two orders of magnitude above what CERF can finance (amounts and scope) by leveraging the crisis risk financing instruments of IFIs, the insurance sector, other pooled funds (ECW), etc. This also means to generate evidence that anticipatory finance does not “cannibalize” rapid response financing.
14. **Invest in AA systems/programs that are scale-ready:** e.g., flood early warning and response capabilities in Bangladesh, FAO desert locusts, etc.
15. **Increase operational readiness for AA:** e.g., link EW systems and risk monitoring to the release of financing (not just alerts); explore practical use of “phased activation” approaches and crisis timelines to advance procurement and logistics required for AA interventions; CERF processes; decision-making chains; agencies’ readiness; pre-agreed sub-implementation arrangements; etc.
16. **Pre-target beneficiaries.**
17. **Accountability:** increase community engagement in the program cycle of AA; ensure transparency in learning and evaluation; Show that pre-identification of possible beneficiaries (pre-targeting) is increasing the quality of programming over rapid response targeting (post-targeting).
18. **Gender.** Systematically integrate better outcomes for women and girls through anticipatory action pilots, including the generation of evidence how anticipatory approaches benefits.
19. **Localization:** use country-based pooled funds (CBPFs); community-level AA; work with local partners; etc.
20. **Simplification and alternative business models:** move from projects, ERPs and frameworks to mainstreaming AA capabilities in the humanitarian system. Integrate AA into the HPC. Explore different institutional/governance arrangements and business processes.
21. **Predictive analytics for AA:** Improve predictability (shocks and impact) and trigger mechanisms fit for AA
22. **Interlinkage with emergency response preparedness and rapid response activities.** Improve the interlinkages of the humanitarian programme cycle, especially the link between anticipatory action and emergency response planning, as well as between anticipatory action and rapid response.

Learning principles

- **Quality and rigor** in independently applying scientific quantitative and qualitative data collection and evaluation methods
- **Transparent** showcasing the successes and areas for improvement.
- **Objective** attempting to eliminate bias, providing all the facts in a balanced manner.
- **Thought leadership** striving to push the status quo and expand upon what is known and currently done.
- **Collaborative** aiming to work with others in a coordinated and complementary manner, coming in where needed.
- **Generate public AA goods** by sharing tools, services and evidence that benefit the humanitarian community as a whole --not only individual organizations doing AA--.
- **Innovate for impact:** adapting ongoing pilots and designing new ones to test hypotheses, create evidence and provide answers to high-value questions that have an impact on people's lives.

Annex 1: AA in 2020: lessons and evidence

2020 was a remarkable year for anticipatory humanitarian action. Covid caused massive disruption and uncertainty across all aspects of human activity. It also propelled fresh thinking about the complexity of risk and laid bare the urgency of getting ahead of crises, especially the ones we can predict.

Collectively, OCHA and partners pushed ahead with a set of AA pilots defined in 2020:

- Drought (Somalia, Ethiopia and Chad);
- Floods (Bangladesh);
- Dry spells and floods (Malawi);
- And cholera (dynamically targeted at-risk locations).

Notably:

1. Bangladesh was the first completed pilot. Compared to previous years, large-scale anticipatory action triggered before one of the worst floods in decades –more than five million people affected- helped more people sooner with roughly half the money. Bangladesh demonstrated that collective AA is possible, has an impact, and can be done well. A rigorous and independent impact evaluation and a series of beneficiary surveys have revealed that AA is indeed cheaper, faster and more dignified.
2. Somalia's drought framework was activated in 2020 as soon as projected food insecurity levels surpassed pre-agreed thresholds. Although drought was not the driver of food insecurity, the ERC made the extraordinary decision to use the AA framework to tackle the compounded impact of floods, desert locusts and Covid. CERF financed a subset of activities in the pre-agreed AA plan that were relevant or could be easily adapted to avert the worst outcomes of this triple threat. The decision revealed two things: i) sometimes we simply cannot afford to wait for reality to fit the model, and ii) having the AA framework in place –even if not used for the originally intended purpose- drastically cut down project planning and approval times and unleashed help sooner to protect and save thousands of lives.
3. Ethiopia developed an AA framework for drought. The trigger mechanism combines drought forecasting with food insecurity projections at a subnational level for better timing and targeting –an improvement based on lessons from Somalia and Bangladesh-. In December, Ethiopia initiated a "phased activation" of the framework to anticipate the impact of below-average rainfall in the spring of 2021. One important benefit of the phased activation –and a new practice- was allowing agencies to kick-start the early procurement and logistics for agriculture and WASH interventions without waiting for a fuller image of the looming crisis to come into full view. The pilot could thus reveal practical ways of

improving operational readiness, which remains one of the tallest barriers for successful AA.

Annex 2: AA in 2021: direction and priorities

The ERC has set the direction and laid out the following priorities for OCHA's work in scaling up collective anticipatory humanitarian action in 2021:

1. Focus on producing realistic, tangible results and successes.
2. Maximize learning and evidence documentation from all activated frameworks.
3. Finalize frameworks for Malawi and Chad by mid-2021 (but in time for possible activation).
4. Continue to support validation of the Global Cholera Risk Model (CRM) and complementary use of predictive tools, assessing next steps by mid-2021.
5. Develop a portfolio for total spend of \$140 million (including \$31m allocated in 2020) from the CERF over a two-year period (mid-2020 to mid-2022) through a selection of AA frameworks with a probability of triggering that is likely to yield the desired spend and learning during the pilot period. (i.e. the maximum portfolio will be larger than \$140 million and may build on inverse correlations of climatic events). This requires to both increase the number of pilots and increase the amount of money spent per pilot (especially for drought). The enhanced portfolio will include:
 - Possible second activation of the Somalia AA framework for drought to maximize learning;
 - Possible second activation in Bangladesh with the AA framework improved based on the 2020 experience, but also with the purpose to make AA more sustainable through closer involvement with the government;
 - New frameworks for storms and floods.
6. Explore (conceptually) AA frameworks triggering on the basis of compound risk.
7. Explore tackling problems of longer duration through AA at a realistic scale by leveraging finance (e.g. plague in Madagascar).
8. Pilot the use of country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) for AA to advance the localization agenda in one or two countries where AA has been successfully piloted with CERF, with the close support of the Humanitarian Coordinator (e.g. Somalia).
9. Test integration of lighter, ad-hoc anticipatory approaches embedded in the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) in two countries by analyzing foreseeable risk and predictable, repeated shocks.
10. Ensure learning, evidence documentation and impact evaluation from all new frameworks.

Annex 3: Criteria for selection of frameworks

OCHA had developed ten key considerations and criteria for the selection of pilots in 2020 that are still of use and worthwhile recalling:

1. **Exposure:** A country that is vulnerable and exposed to drought shocks, sudden onset disasters and/or communicable disease outbreaks.
2. **Humanitarian impact:** The high probability that if such a shock occurs the country will result in severe humanitarian impact.
3. **Predictive capability:** There is a predictive analytics model or decision framework that can be used to forecast the shock and its impact, including
 - a. Availability of data and predictive models
 - b. Availability of early warning products by the IASC community
 - c. Availability of parameters and triggers in place or a capacity to develop them in-country to inform decisions
4. **Window of opportunity:** There is enough lead time for anticipatory action interventions.
5. **Country-level leadership and capacity:** There is strong country-level leadership buy-in, understanding of and experience by other actors, including a combination of:
 - a. Willingness by RC/HC, OCHA HoO and Country Team to develop a framework.
 - b. OCHA presence, capacity, and moment in an Office's life cycle
 - c. Cluster capacity
 - d. Acceptance by the host government for an anticipatory approach, or warning/anticipatory system already in place by government
 - e. A call by evaluations calling for more anticipatory approaches (e.g. for Ethiopia)
 - f. A request from a country office or team to support anticipatory action
6. **Implementation capacity, e.g.**
 - a. There are interventions and a capacity to develop pre-agreed plans that can be implemented to reduce the impact of the shock
 - b. Consideration of what already exists by partners in country which could be scaled-up and brought to a system-wide level
 - c. Strength of cash distribution systems
7. **Possibility to crowd-in other contingency finance**
 - a. World Bank
 - b. Donors
 - c. Country based pooled funds
 - d. Other funds [SDG]
 - e. Education Cannot Wait

8. **Donor interest in a particular shock or country**
9. **Ability to monitor and evaluate framework** for learning and proof of concept
10. **Minimal complicating factors**