

# Executive Summary

## The Anticipatory Turn

### Distributing Aid in the Age of Climate Change

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#### Can anticipatory action help solve the problem of humanitarian climate crisis?

Climate change presents a dual challenge for humanitarian actors. It is expected to drive a rapid increase in global humanitarian and protection needs, while simultaneously making aid provision more expensive and diminishing available resources. Experts estimate that up to 200 million people could require humanitarian assistance due to climate-related disasters by 2050, raising the associated costs from the current US\$ 20 billion to US\$ 29 billion. These climate-induced pressures add to the existing issues of stagnating aid budgets and declining public support for international assistance.

In response, the humanitarian community has increasingly turned to early and forward-looking aid provision. Many organisations are testing and developing approaches that enable them to provide assistance before a crisis unfolds, rather than during or immediately after. This paper analyses the ethical and policy implications of this 'anticipatory turn' in international humanitarian affairs. It focuses specifically on Anticipatory Action (AA), which involves pre-agreed activities, triggers and decision-making rules to act ahead of a predicted hazard, aiming to prevent or lessen its acute humanitarian impacts.

#### Key Findings

#### The potential of AA is curtailed by the lack of funding and competing policy priorities

Anticipatory Action (AA) is a positive force in contemporary humanitarian affairs. It can help aid organisations manage the impacts of climate change by making humanitarian response more effective, efficient and predictable. Interviewees argued that AA can also make aid work more dignified and humane, particularly by making assistance available in advance and thereby challenging the established practice of humanitarian intervention being triggered by visible human suffering. Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that AA could improve humanitarian impartiality through the use of pre-established emergency plans.

The study finds that while AA has the potential to reshape humanitarian thought and practice in the long term, aid organisations should be conservative

in their expectations. The transformative power of AA is currently limited by a lack of dedicated funding, especially for the operationalisation of AA frameworks (commonly

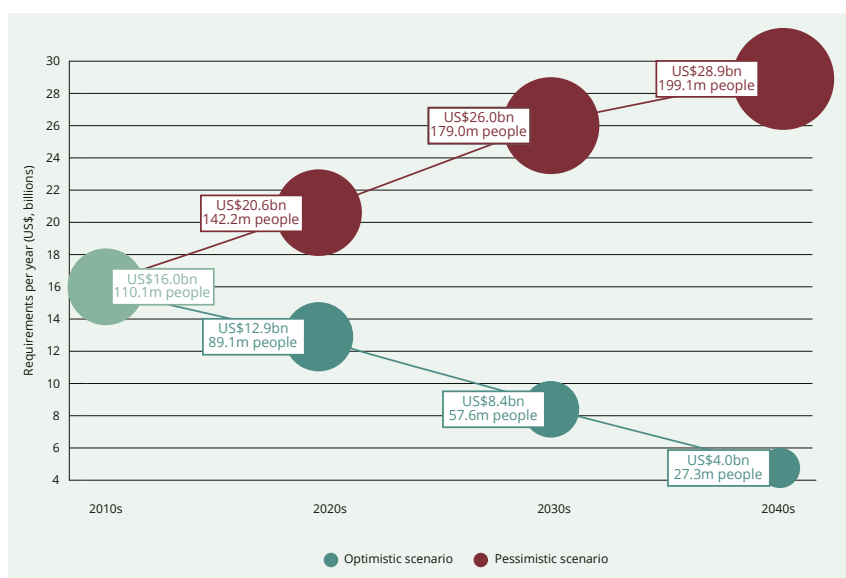


Figure 1: Two potential scenarios for climate-related humanitarian needs and associated costs  
Source: IFRC 2022, *Where it matters the most: Smart climate financing for the hardest hit people*, IFRC: Geneva; Adapted by CHA

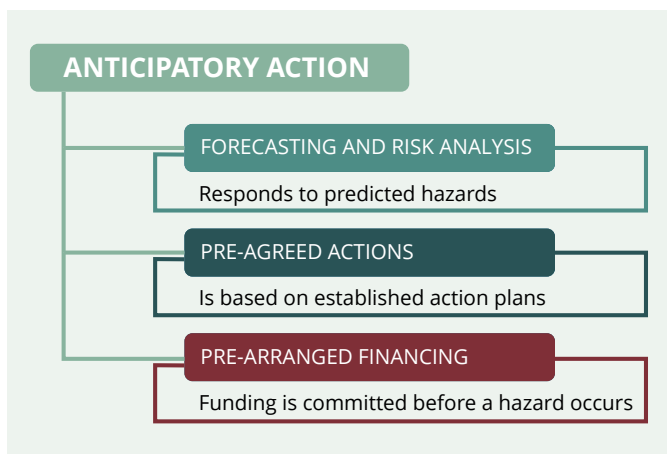


Figure 2: Definition of Anticipatory Action

Source: CHA

referred to as ‘fuel money’). This shortfall not only hinders AA’s ability to address the negative humanitarian impacts of climate change but also limits its scope and impact in the aid sector, ultimately reducing its potential to drive more profound systemic reform.

Another key finding is that close donor involvement in mainstreaming AA in the humanitarian sector may have unintended policy consequences. Germany has been a staunch supporter of AA ever since the concept first emerged in the early 2010s. Its political and financial support have been instrumental in piloting and institutionalising the approach. However, the interviews suggest that strong donor commitment may create pressure on humanitarian organisations to prioritise AA in their everyday work. Interviewees expressed concern that this could lock the sector into potentially unfavourable policy positions by promoting the anticipatory approach at the expense of reactive aid provision.

Finally, the paper examined a scenario in which investments in AA negatively impact humanitarian ability to respond to the immediate and critical needs of individuals today. The study finds that, based on currently available data, it is difficult to accurately estimate the impact of AA funding on traditional response finance. Specific challenges include the lack of standardised reporting practices and internationally shared terminology, which make it difficult to track different funding streams. The paper therefore calls for a more rigorous evaluation of the relationship between anticipatory and reactive humanitarian response finance.

## Key Considerations

### Recommendations for humanitarian practitioners:

1. Aid organisations should continue integrating AA and other risk-informed activities into their everyday work.
2. At the same time, organisations should be realistic about the transformative power of AA. This is currently curtailed by the limited availability of operational, pre-arranged funding.
3. Organisations should ensure that AA complements their reactive response activities. They should continue to actively engage with institutional funders on AA-related issues, while also advocating for traditional aid provision where relevant and necessary.

### Recommendations for donors:

1. Humanitarian donors should ensure that funding for AA is sufficient and provided in addition to their existing Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitments.
2. Donors should promote greater autonomy and independence for aid organisations engaged in AA activities. This includes providing more flexible operational funding (“fuel money”) and enabling aid organisations to allocate it as they see fit.
3. Donors should work to improve the transparency of AA funding and reporting practices. This includes using internationally agreed terminology and following standardised reporting practices wherever possible.

## Methods in Brief

The findings are based on desk research and semi-structured expert interviews. The interviews were conducted both in-person and online between April and December 2024. All respondents currently work or have previously worked for Germany-based aid organisations, specialising in topics that include climate change, donor policy and advocacy, and AA. In total, 18 respondents from 12 different organisations participated in the study.