

# The Anticipatory Turn

Distributing Aid  
in the Age of  
Climate Change

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**CHA**

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## Abbreviations

<b>AA</b>	Anticipatory Action
<b>CERF</b>	Central Emergency Response Fund
<b>CVA</b>	Cash and Voucher Assistance
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>GFFO</b>	German Federal Foreign Office
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies
<b>OCHA</b>	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>REAP</b>	Risk-informed Early Action Partnership
<b>UNDRR</b>	UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
<b>WAHAFA</b>	Welthungerhilfe Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Facility
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

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# Executive Summary

## **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 lack of funding and competing policy priorities**

Anticipatory Action 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 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 humanitarians' 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.

## 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.

## 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 remain 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 engage actively 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.



# 1. Introduction

## Climate change presents two major challenges for humanitarian actors

Climate change presents two major challenges for humanitarian actors. On the one hand, it is expected to cause a rapid increase in global humanitarian and protection needs. These needs are primarily driven by increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather events affecting underprepared and -developed communities in the Global South. Data collected by the International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2022) suggests that without urgent and sustained action to address climate change, the number of people requiring emergency assistance due to climate and weather-related disasters could nearly double between the 2010s and 2040s (see Figure 1 below). These findings are supported by climate science, which shows that the number of climate-related disasters doubled between 1980 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> The most rapid growth has occurred in the number of floods and droughts, which nearly tripled over this time period.

As the number of affected people rises, so too do funding requirements. According to the IFRC (2022), the humanitarian cost of climate-related disasters could reach US\$ 29 billion per annum by 2050. However, as the organisation notes, the actual cost is likely to be higher due to inflation driven by resource scarcity and the destabilising effects of successive climate shocks on national economies. These financial pressures add to existing challenges in securing sufficient humanitarian funding. In 2024, less than half (49.7 %) of global humanitarian funding needs were met.<sup>2</sup> The outlook for the current year is similarly bleak, with only 10 % of UN-coordinated appeals funded by mid-May 2025 (ibid.).

The combined effect of rising needs and growing funding requirements makes climate change one of the most pressing challenges facing the aid community. It is widely recognised as requiring immediate and decisive action from both humanitarian practitioners and policymakers alike, lest the increasing climate impacts overwhelm

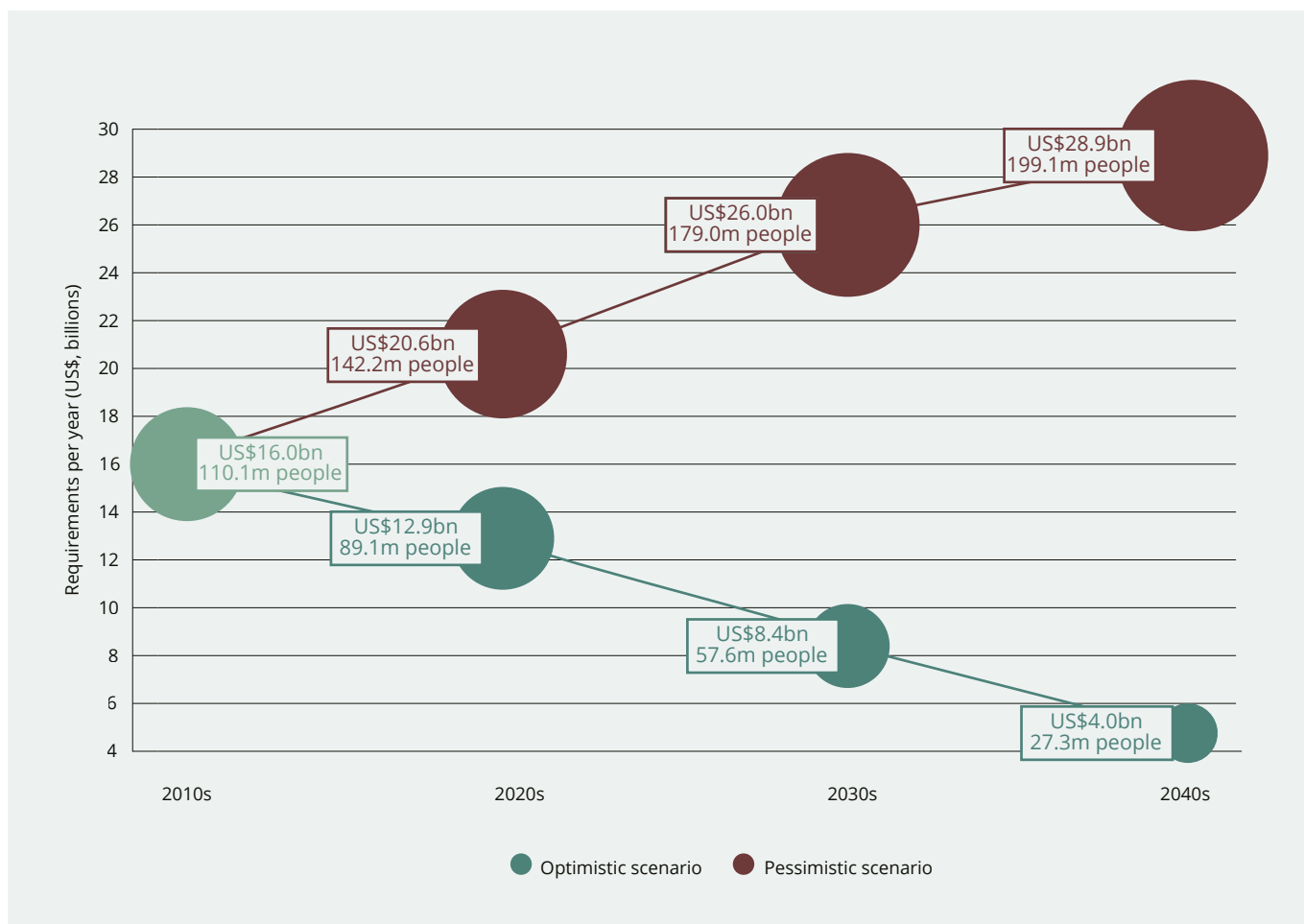


Figure 1: Two potential scenarios for climate-related humanitarian needs and associated costs. Source: IFRC 2022

## Climate change increases humanitarian needs and diminishes available resources

question the established wisdom of emergency relief provision, particularly its traditionally reactive nature. Increasingly, humanitarian organisations are exploring

the skills and capacities of the aid system (see Tammi, 2025, upcoming). The extraordinary scope of the crisis has caused many humanitarians to

ways to provide assistance before a crisis occurs, rather than during or immediately after. As Slim (2024) writes, anticipation is becoming a key humanitarian principle in the “long Earth emergency” with which humanity is currently grappling. This shift is not only operational, but also moral; broadening the scope of humanitarianism to include not just present needs, but those that are yet to arise.

## 1.1. About this study

This paper analyses the ethical and policy implications of this ‘anticipatory turn’ in international humanitarian affairs. It focuses specifically on Anticipatory Action (AA), which uses pre-agreed activities, triggers and funding to act ahead of a predicted hazard to prevent or reduce its acute humanitarian impacts. While AA should not be considered representative of the whole range of early and forward-looking methodologies currently available, it stands out as one of the most prominent. As outlined in Section 2, AA has attracted growing interest from both aid organisations and donors since its emergence in the early 2010s.

### AA is a strategically and professionally advanced priority for the German government

This interest is particularly pronounced in the German context. According to a study by CHA, AA is “a strategically and professionally advanced priority” for the

German government (Hövelmann and Südhoff, 2023, 21). Germany has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to a paradigm shift towards more efficient, effective and forward-looking humanitarian assistance (see GFFO 2019; 2024). It is also the largest international funder of AA and is currently the only donor that has set a fixed target for a share (5 %) of its national humanitarian budget dedicated to pre-arranged finance (Scott, 2022, 13). While planned cuts in the German Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget are likely to reduce its AA funding, the country remains a key player in the field.

This research paper explores Germany's interest in AA, while also discussing potential drawbacks associated with close donor involvement. It argues that while both humanitarian practitioners and donors share an interest in the cost-saving potential of AA, they diverge on other key issues. Humanitarian practitioners often view AA as an opportunity to reform the aid system and address existing challenges related to dignified and impartial aid delivery. Although similar considerations are also present in donor discourse on AA, they can be

overshadowed by short-term (political and other) gains associated with the anticipatory turn. Among others, the paper finds that strong donor commitment may lead to pressure on humanitarian organisations to prioritise AA in their everyday work. Over time, this dynamic could lock the sector into potentially unfavourable policy positions, especially by promoting the anticipatory approach at the expense of reactive aid provision.

The findings are based on desk research and 18 semi-structured expert interviews. The interview respondents were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. This approach targeted individuals who work or have worked for Germany-based humanitarian and/or development organisations and who specialise in AA, climate change, donor policy and advocacy or related topics. At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to identify other knowledgeable individuals in their professional networks. This method resulted in a total of 18 interviews, with respondents from 12 different organisations. The primary data was complemented by informal background interviews with climate experts and others outside the defined research profile. The data collection took place both online and in person between April and December 2024.

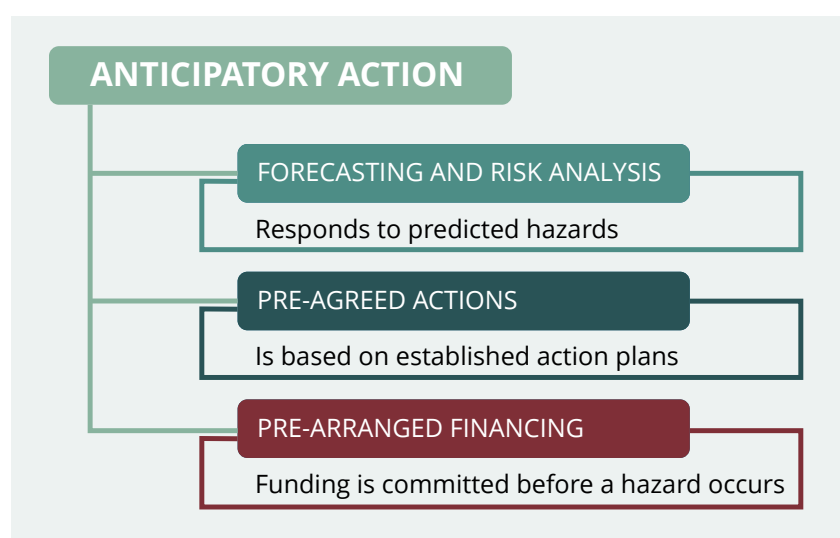


Figure 2: Key components of Anticipatory Action



## What is Anticipatory Action (AA)?

In this paper, Anticipatory Action (AA) refers to actions taken ahead of predicted hazardous events for the purpose of preventing or reducing their acute humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold (IFRC 2020). These actions are typically pre-planned and pre-financed, and they are implemented when a previously agreed trigger threshold is reached. When well-designed and properly implemented, these triggers help humanitarians decide when and where to act. While some organisations define triggers solely based on scientific evidence (such as weather and climate forecasts combined with risk data), others include a human element by incorporating expert judgement or local knowledge to determine the optimal timing, location, and focus of early action.<sup>3</sup>

The use of capital letters is intended to distinguish AA from other available approaches. As Knox Clarke (2022) observes, the terms ‘anticipatory action’ and ‘early action’ are sometimes used synonymously. In such cases, the definition may also include actions that rely on forecasts but lack advance planning or designated funding. Moreover, while AA refers specifically to activities implemented just before a predicted hazardous event, early action may follow a longer timeline. Some actors restrict the term to actions preceding a hazardous event, while others extend the term to include actions taken shortly after a hazardous event but before peak disaster impact. Even more broadly, ‘anticipatory mindset’ can be used to describe a proactive approach to identify and address issues that may hinder humanitarian operations and undermine their intended effects (see Insecurity Insight 2024).

Finally, it is important to note that AA is limited to actions taken in response to a specific, imminent event as opposed to a more general hazard. Examples include evacuating people and livestock and reinforcing housing and critical infrastructure in response to a predicted flood, replenishing cereal bank reserves and providing Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) in anticipation of a drought, installing cooling systems and alerting the local population before a forecasted heatwave, or providing protective clothing and veterinary kits to protect livestock before a forecasted coldwave.

## 2. Background: AA as part of the humanitarian funding landscape

### **Many humanitarians advocate for a more proactive and anticipatory approach to aid provision**

Today, many humanitarians advocate for a more proactive and anticipatory approach to aid provision. This includes several organisations based in Germany, most notably the German Red Cross. The organisation played a key role in shaping the concept of AA in the early 2010s when it was known as Forecast-based Financing or FbF, and in promoting it to donors and other humanitarian organisations (Tammi, 2025, upcoming). Another early leader in this area is Welthungerhilfe, which describes itself as “the first German non-governmental organization to pursue Anticipatory Humanitarian Action”.<sup>4</sup> It has implemented AA pilot activities since 2017 and currently hosts the Welthungerhilfe Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Facility (WAHAFA). Other organisations, such as Action against Hunger Germany, are also working to research and advance AA within their own areas of expertise.<sup>5</sup>

### **AA is known for its potential to reduce the cost of humanitarian assistance**

Internationally, AA is best known for its potential to reduce the cost of humanitarian assistance. However, as discussed in Sections 3.1. and 3.3., its benefits extend beyond mere financial efficiency. By reducing the humanitarian impact of a tropical storm, drought or other kinds of natural hazards, AA can help communities avoid harmful coping strategies, such as selling land or other assets. As Welthungerhilfe observes: “With today’s ability to predict hazards accurately, taking anticipatory action is not only cost-effective but also a more dignified and humane way to support communities, ensuring their well-being and safeguarding their future.”<sup>6</sup>

This view is shared by major international donors. A briefing note by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida, 2024, 1) observes: “As humanitarian needs continue to increase while global humanitarian funding decreases, the case for Anticipatory Action [...] has emerged as a way to both ethically and cost-effectively address needs ahead of climate and non-climate induced crises.” While AA cannot prevent hazardous events from occurring, it offers the potential to make humanitarian work “more dignified, timely and cost-effective” (2) by shifting the onus from reactive, post-disaster aid provision to early and proactive response. The German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO,

2022, 2) similarly describes AA as an innovative humanitarian tool that “has great potential when it comes to using donors’ money more effectively and helping more people.” It is “two to seven times more effective” than post-disaster aid provision (ibid.), and it also supports long-term disaster resilience by ensuring that hazardous events do not reverse hard-earned development gains in the affected areas.

In 2022, the G7 Foreign Ministers issued a statement expressing their “commitment to advocate for, scale up and systematically mainstream anticipatory action into the humanitarian system.” Among the signatories were the United States (US), Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom (UK), which were the four biggest humanitarian donor countries at the time. In 2024, two of these countries (Germany and the UK) joined a group of non-state humanitarian actors as members of an anticipatory action caucus within the Grand Bargain. The caucus identified several challenges to mainstreaming AA at a broader scale. These included scarce and fragmented funding, insufficient coordination among actors and frameworks, and the absence of a shared methodology for tracking funds and informing advocacy. Within the Grand Bargain framework, the caucus committed to resolving these issues.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the growing political support for AA, operational funding remains limited. Available resources are often categorised as either “build money” or “fuel money.” Build money supports the development of anticipatory systems, such as early action protocols and early warning mechanisms. Fuel money is intended to activate these systems once a hazard is predicted. Funding for build money has traditionally been more accessible, with one study surmising that the kind of “capacity development” activities associated with build money are more familiar and therefore palatable for donors (Scott, 2022, 18). In contrast, fuel money presents a risk that funds will be set aside but not triggered, which can create the perception that the resources were “wasted” (ibid.).

### **Operational funding for AA remains limited**

A 2024 report by Development Initiatives finds that funding for AA has increased in recent years but still accounts for less than 1 % of international humanitarian assistance. In 2022, US\$ 158 million was made available for AA frameworks, and another US\$ 55 million was disbursed through AA activations. In the following years, these amounts rose to US\$ 305 million and 198 million,

respectively. This meant the share of AA in international humanitarian assistance grew from 0.4 % in 2022 to 0.7 % in 2023. While the report acknowledges this positive development, it also notes that the “low share [of AA funding] continues to be far below the 20 % of humanitarian response requirements that 2019 research identified to be highly predictable” (Development Initiatives, 2024, 44). Other studies have presented similar results, describing the share of AA funding from overall humanitarian crisis response finance as “extremely small” (Scott, 2022, 16) and the process of universalising AA to new donor profiles as “an ongoing endeavour” (Koy et al., 2022, 20).

### **Anticipatory action is expanding in scale globally**

Although these estimates are often considered authoritative, they should be interpreted with caution.

As discussed in Section 3.3., accurately estimating the amount of funding directed towards AA can be challenging. The lack of common terminology and shared reporting practices can result in early and anticipatory action projects being mislabeled or left out entirely. Emphasising the limited scale of AA funding may also be read as an effort to garner greater donor attention and resources. While much remains to be done to fully operationalise AA in the humanitarian sector, there are several promising developments. The latest global overview report by the Anticipation Hub (2024, 4) finds “clear evidence that anticipatory action is expanding in scale globally.” It shows that between 2022 and 2023, the number of people covered by AA frameworks increased by 43 %. The number of active AA frameworks grew from 70 to 107, while trigger activations rose from 47 in 2022 to 98 in 2023 (ibid.). As the report points out, these trends suggest a growing interest in AA, including from actors beyond the humanitarian sector.

### **Increasingly bleak financial prospects**

In addition to grappling with the effects of climate change, the humanitarian sector is facing a broader scarcity of resources. After several years of increasing donor funding, international humanitarian financing stalled in 2023 at US\$ 43 billion (see Figures 3 and 4 on the next page). This was a record figure, driven largely by increased contributions to the Ukraine crisis. In the same year, however, several key donors announced cuts to their aid budgets, including Germany (-7.5 %), the UK (-16 %) and Canada (-24 %) (Development Initiatives, 2024). While the financial impact of these cuts was largely offset by increases in other donor budgets (namely Japan +68 %, Norway +62 % and the US +18 %), they narrowed the humanitarian donor base, with fewer donors providing an increasingly large share of the total available funding (ibid.).

Preliminary data suggests that the value of public humanitarian assistance from major international donors has continued to decline. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that the value of humanitarian assistance provided by the members of its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) fell by 9.6 % between 2023 and 2024.<sup>8</sup> Since the DAC includes many of the largest providers of aid, this reduction has been interpreted as an indication of a more permanent stagnation of public humanitarian and development funding. “With aid budgets already cratering this year, it is likely the sector will see total funding figures slip further down in 2025”, predicted one article in *The New Humanitarian*.<sup>9</sup> Another piece published by the Australia-based Development Policy Centre mused that the recent developments make it “incontrovertible that global ODA will fall from 2024 to 2025 and further thereafter”, suggesting a “best case scenario” of a 25 % decline by 2027 when compared to the 2023 levels.<sup>10</sup>

This increasingly constrained financial situation heightens the importance and appeal of cost-saving measures like AA. The converging trends outlined above have normalised the narrative of ‘doing more with less’ among the aid community. Once primarily a donor expectation, the mindset is now echoed by humanitarian organisations themselves as they look for ways to stretch limited resources (see, for example, Moninger, 2017; Tillott, 2024; Gil Baizan, 2025). AA is the latest addition to these efforts to innovate and find more effective and efficient ways of delivering life-saving assistance.

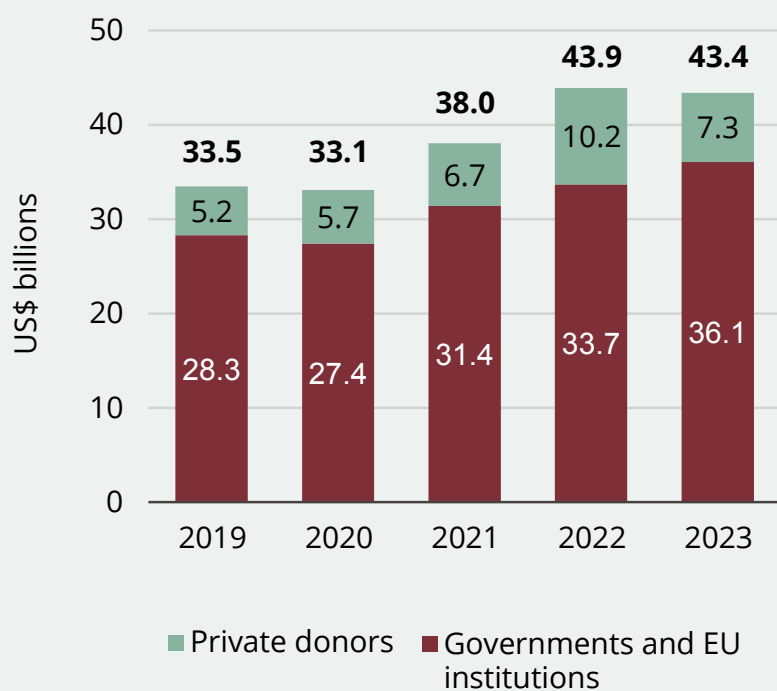


Figure 3: Total international humanitarian assistance 2019–2023. Source: Development Initiatives 2024; Adapted by CHA

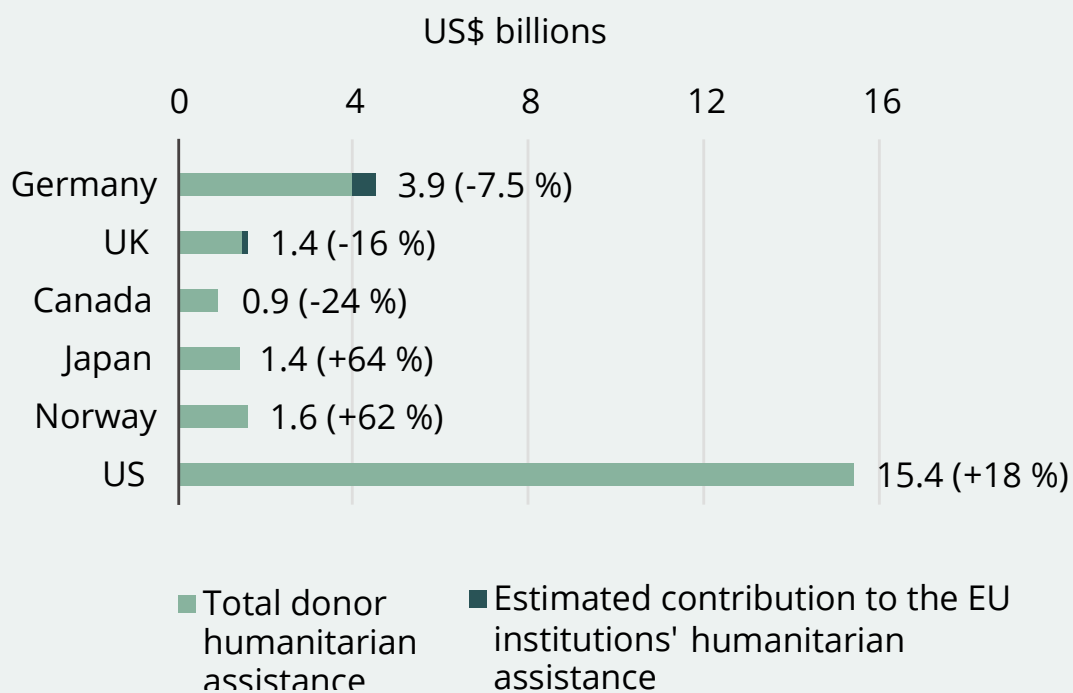


Figure 4: Levels of public humanitarian funding in 2023, and change from 2022. Source: Development Initiatives 2024; Adapted by CHA

### 3. Practitioner perspectives on AA

Having thus far discussed AA in the broader humanitarian funding landscape, the paper now turns to a more critical evaluation of its ethical and policy implications. This section draws on the interview data to review some of the key arguments commonly cited in favour of AA, including its potential to a) help humanitarians better

manage the effects of climate change, b) make aid provision more predictable, dignified and apolitical, and c) reduce the financial cost of humanitarian assistance. Particular attention is given to potential trade-offs and unintended consequences that may arise from mainstreaming AA in the humanitarian sector.

#### 3.1. Operational and financial significance: An opportunity to fix a broken system

##### **Humanitarians must respond to the growing threat of climate change**

The interview data identifies climate change as a key driving force behind the ongoing anticipatory turn. One interviewee (3.014) mused that while “manmade [sic] hazards [...] are closer to our heart and emotions and seem more cruel and more relevant”, it is important that the humanitarian community also acknowledges and responds to the growing threat of climate change. The respondent cited recent examples of extreme weather events (including heavy rains in the Balkans and a typhoon-like event in Libya, which, they remarked, “to me was unheard of”) to illustrate that “this weather pattern is getting out of control” and that “we should really, really try our best to understand it.” The speaker considered increasing investment in anticipation to be a logical response to the current situation, while thinking that not making an effort to understand natural hazards “would be a very odd reading of our reality nowadays.”

##### **AA is seen as a way to address ethical and systemic challenges in the humanitarian sector**

Nevertheless, while confirming climate change as an important factor, the interviews also suggest that it alone does not explain the current popularity of AA among humanitarian practitioners. For many respondents, AA was not only a solution to the threat of climate change; it was also a way to address deeper ethical and systemic challenges related to the established operational model. One speaker (3.001) lamented the way the aid system and its funding structures use human suffering as a “trigger point” for launching a response. They observed that while post-disaster relief saves lives, it also risks locking people into positions of vulnerability by requiring them to experience life-threatening situations before becoming eligible for assistance.

The respondent went on to observe that this trend is further reinforced by Western audiences and donors who “want to see that suffering before they feel an urgency to intervene.” AA removes this obligation by making assistance readily available before a crisis fully unfolds, offering a more humane and dignified way to provide aid. Therefore, the speaker concluded, the anticipatory turn is “not just linked to climate” but also to a broader desire to decolonise aid provision and “actually change things on a larger scale.”

Disillusionment with existing structures influenced how respondents negotiated the ethical dilemmas associated with anticipatory aid provision. In the interviews, it was suggested that AA could be considered morally problematic because it uses resources (both human and financial) that might otherwise be directed towards meeting immediate humanitarian needs. This claim was supported by a reference to the growing humanitarian funding gap (see Development Initiatives, 2024, 16-18). In response, one respondent (3.013) argued that the chronic lack of funding should not be viewed as a moral inhibitor but rather as a further incentive to invest in new technologies. “In general, there's always a funding shortfall,” they reflected, and aid providers “are always in a dilemma of where does the funding go.”

The respondent viewed this ongoing state of scarcity as further evidence of the shortcomings of the current operational model. They framed anticipation as a form of systemic innovation that can generate positive ‘buzz’ in the otherwise static humanitarian sector: “I mean, in the long-term, it [AA] will save us funding, right? So even though some of these protocols might never be activated and they still then take up resources to develop them, it's still, I think, a move in the right direction.” The speaker thus framed the question of AA less as a matter of which needs to prioritise and more as a call for the courage to innovate and test new approaches in a context shaped by uncertainty.

Another interviewee (3.007) raised a similar point when reflecting on “the reality and realisation of underfunding in responding to humanitarian crises”. The respondent noted that humanitarian organisations are operating in an environment defined by growing competition over scarce financial resources. As a consequence, “the utilitarian argument is becoming more valid” as organisations are increasingly forced to scrutinise how they allocate resources between different emergencies and how they calculate the cost-benefit ratio of individual policy decisions:

**Because, you know, we [humanitarians] are already in a situation where we can't deal with the multiplicity of crises. So the only thing we can do about it looking forward is to prepare and anticipate in order to avoid more [...] victims as losses.**

This perception that the humanitarian system is ill-equipped to deal with the effects of climate change was common among the interview respondents. It is supported by evidence suggesting that, unless urgent and

decisive action is taken, climate-related needs will outpace available humanitarian resources within a few decades, as noted at the beginning of this paper. Humanitarians are therefore well advised to explore alternative approaches and develop new operational models to better weather these changes.

**Climate-related needs will outpace available humanitarian resources within a few decades**

At the same time, aid providers should remain realistic about what can be achieved. Funding constraints, particularly related to operational funding, are likely to limit AA's impact in the sector. Moreover, as the next section discusses, humanitarian organisations are not the only actors with stakes in the game. Donors are also actively promoting AA in the aid sector, often for reasons that only partially align with those of humanitarian practitioners.

### 3.2. Politicisation of aid: Does the problem remain?

#### **Anticipatory action could be more impartial than reactive aid**

The implementation of AA activities faces many of the same challenges as reactive aid provision. Humanitarian organisations must still make difficult choices about how to distribute limited resources among crisis-affected populations. Funding remains scarce, and aid operations are often influenced by competing political and other interests. At the same time, AA does offer certain relative advantages. By making aid more readily available to a greater number of people, it is often argued that AA improves the effectiveness of emergency relief provision. Moreover, as Halfpap (2021) writes, in non-conflict affected situations “pre-established emergency plans – and hence lower time pressure – decrease the risk of bias in the selection of target groups.” In ideal circumstances, these groups are pre-selected and periodically updated. This diminishes the risk of human error and, Halfpap concludes, “could make anticipatory action more impartial than reactive aid.”

Given this assumed neutralising effect, it is notable that many interviewees emphasised the political significance of AA. One respondent (3.004) pointed out that from the offset, AA has been an important policy tool for Germany. The concept gained traction during a period of rapid growth in Germany's national humanitarian budget. Between 2010 and 2015, the value of German humanitarian assistance had more than tripled, rising from € 0.1 billion to € 0.51 billion (GFFO 2018, 2022; see Figure 5). However, these substantial financial contributions were not fully reflected in Germany's international humanitarian donor profile (see Hövelmann and Südhoff, 2023).

The respondent saw this mismatch as a key factor explaining the country's political buy-in. Upon being introduced to the concept of anticipation, the speaker reflected, “they thought, okay, this is a really good idea and probably also thought, okay, could gain some awareness in the humanitarian sphere by pushing a topic that by then was not pushed by anyone else.” This early interest was soon followed by financial contributions, initially through a pilot project to test the anticipatory approach in practice, and later by developing “a whole programme” and co-funding the establishment of the Anticipation Hub in Berlin in December 2020.

Germany's interest in AA has been crucial for mainstreaming it in the humanitarian sector. Yet such close donor involvement can also lead to unintended consequences. Another interviewee (3.006) described AA as “one of the few fields of work where Germany is perceived to do something very outspoken, innovative” and wondered whether the desire to maintain this status could lock the sector into potentially unfavourable policy positions: “once you have reached a specific standpoint and are being perceived as [...] a stakeholder in this field – and Germany as a player in the topic – you don't want to give up on that.” The respondent expressed concern that Germany's political commitment to AA might cause the donor to misread the humanitarian landscape and push for an anticipatory approach even when reactive aid provision would be more appropriate. The speaker

**Germany's interest has been crucial for mainstreaming AA in the humanitarian sector**



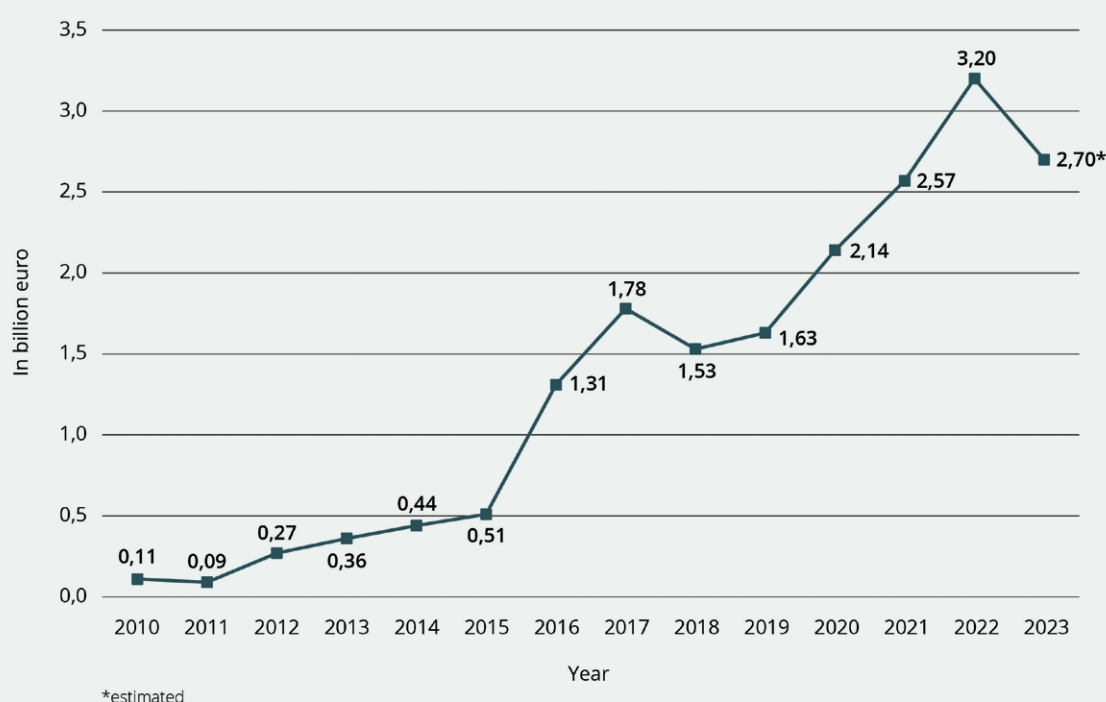


Figure 5: GFFO funds for humanitarian action 2010-2023. Source: Reports of the Federal Government on German humanitarian aid abroad 2014-2017; 2018-2021

felt that the ever-growing climate impacts would justify doubling down on essential needs ("Now really, you have to go into the humanitarian response operations and let's forget about all the rest and just try to save as many lives as possible as long as we can.") but did not see this as a viable policy option as long as key donors remained committed to the cause of anticipatory humanitarian action.

As the above quote suggests, this respondent was one of the few who voiced a critical opinion regarding AA. The speaker explained how their outlook has shifted from hopeful to hesitant:

**I just see that we are not succeeding and that the crisis is becoming [...] a problem for the entire system. And even by having the political will and having anticipatory funding put aside and doing a lot of anticipatory actions already, we don't see the needs decreasing. We see them still increasing. And now we are facing a time where even the budgets are going down. [...] So the question [is] do we perhaps have to surrender a little bit this idea that this is still working properly?**

The respondent went on to reflect on the tradeoffs between continuing to invest in "innovative scientific base" and "nice pilot ideas", on the one hand, and "knowing that we will not succeed in addressing all the needs" and thus opting to address current needs as best as possible, on the other. "At the moment, I'm in this transition phase where I thought it was a great idea", they explained, "but I'm just seeing that [...] the humanitarian dimension of all the problems in the world is just overwhelming the entire system, everybody in it."

This suggests that aid organisations should continue to carefully evaluate the value and applicability of AA to ensure that public funds are optimally allocated between present and future needs. At the same time, it is important not to overstate humanitarians' ability to influence donor policy. While aid organisations can lobby for certain policy outcomes, they have limited control over how funds are allocated. Organisations receiving institutional funding are "a little bit at the mercy of what the donor tells you", as one respondent (3.012) put it. They continued:

**Public funds need to be optimally allocated between present and future needs**

**So the donor tells you, “We’re giving ten [sic] per cent of humanitarian funding from now on to anticipatory action.” What are we going to do? We’re going to look at ten per cent of our product portfolio to make sure that it’s anticipatory action. Do we have a choice? No, we don’t. [...] That’s just the reality of institutional funding.**

Despite these challenges, the paper encourages aid organisations to continue independently weighing the benefits of AA against their existing humanitarian commitments.

### 3.3. Prioritisation: Managing the risk of harmful resource transfer

#### **AA reduces the risk of long-term aid dependency**

The final argument in favour of AA concerns its cost-effectiveness. Not only does AA reduce the price tag of current humanitarian efforts by acting before a predicted hazard occurs or before its most acute impacts are felt, but it is also expected to generate long-term gains. “The idea behind is that in the longer term, anticipatory humanitarian action should lead us to cost saving and to preventing future crises by having already intervened now,” one respondent (3.001) explained. AA strengthens the resilience of crisis-affected communities by reducing the time between the outbreak of a crisis and the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Among other advantages, this means that communities are less likely to sell property or personal assets such as land, tools or cattle to weather the crisis. AA therefore safeguards their livelihoods and reduces the risk of long-term aid dependency.

#### **Dedicating resources to humanitarian innovation could reduce the availability of traditional aid**

However, the respondent continued, “we are in a situation where you have a lot of crises already” and dedicating resources to humanitarian innovation could mean that “people who are already facing crises do not receive the resources they need.” The speaker emphasised the importance of “finding additional resources to do both [anticipatory and reactive aid work] in parallel” yet viewed the reality in much bleaker terms: “If one gets more, the other gets less.” They described the current situation as a “sort of tit for tat”, whereby public funds are shifted from one budget line to another without any significant increase in the overall amount. This creates an ethical dilemma, as it undermines effective aid delivery in conflict-affected and other crisis settings that may not be amenable to anticipatory humanitarian response.

Accurately evaluating the impact of AA on traditional humanitarian financing is challenging. One speaker (3.005) noted that while they “haven’t got the impression that anticipatory funding is crowding out [traditional] response funding”, a more serious evaluation of the

This is especially important because there is currently limited knowledge about the impact of AA on traditional response funding, as explained below. Until this issue is resolved, it is commendable that humanitarian organisations continue to carefully assess the need and applicability of AA in specific humanitarian contexts, while simultaneously lobbying donors for parallel increases in both reactive and anticipatory response funding.

relationship “would be a question for the figures.” The respondent emphasised their positive outlook towards AA (“I think it’s good that it [the funding] is there now.”) but also stressed the need for a balanced approach: “Should we drop anticipatory humanitarian action in favour of allocating these funds to crises that have [already] occurred?” They believed this must be decided “case by case” taking into account the fact that “preparation is needed and [thus] we cannot really play one off against the other.”

Determining the scope and impact of the available AA funding is crucial for finding an appropriate balance between reactive and anticipatory humanitarian response finance. This is both an operational issue, ensuring equitable access to and availability of the two types of assistance, and an epistemological one, influencing how humanitarians perceive and frame related ethical questions. This is reflected in the response of one interviewee (3.004), who found it morally problematic “to invest in something that might happen in half a year or in three months, or in two months, when actually people now are hungry before your eyes.” However, they emphasised that this was “only a theoretical risk” since the vast majority of humanitarian funding still goes to traditional emergency response. This argument appeared repeatedly in the interviews, with many respondents recognising the theoretical risk of harmful resource transfer but arguing that it does not occur in practice.

Such arguments are problematic because they do not sufficiently consider the absolute, rather than relative, value of AA funding. As noted in the introduction, Germany, which is known as the world’s second-largest humanitarian donor, has committed since 2023 to allocating at least 5 % of its national humanitarian budget to AA. Based on 2023 funding levels, this amounts to roughly € 135 million per annum. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has similarly declared that it “aims to allocate 10 % of its annual funding to support coordinated anticipatory action.”<sup>11</sup> With an annual funding target of US\$ one billion, this would mean an additional US\$ 100 million per annum for AA funding if fully realised. While aims and pledges should not be confused



with actual disbursements, they are useful indicators of the increasing prominence and recognition of the anticipatory approach.

Against this background, the paper argues that a more rigorous evaluation of the relationship between anticipatory and reactive humanitarian response finance is needed. When assessing this relationship, it is important to remember that resource reallocation can manifest in forms other than direct transfer of funds from one budget line to another. A 2022 study commissioned by Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) and authored by Scott finds that initiatives are not always correctly labelled as early or anticipatory action, which

can lead to underestimating the overall value of AA programming. The study also notes that existing methods of tracking donor spending are not always suitable for pre-arranged finance. For example, investments in insurance policies may yield a level of coverage or payouts significantly larger than the original amount spent, making it difficult to accurately estimate their financial value. These difficulties add to existing challenges in monitoring aid spending, such as unrealised pledges and the double-counting of previous commitments as 'new money' (Scott, 2022, 14; see also Tammi, 2024).

**Initiatives are not always correctly labelled as early or anticipatory action**

## 4. Conclusion and recommendations

### **AA is a positive force in contemporary humanitarian affairs**

AA is a positive force in contemporary humanitarian affairs. It can help aid organisations manage the effects of climate change by making humanitarian response more effective, efficient and predictable. Interviews with humanitarian practitioners also highlighted expectations that AA will make aid work more dignified and humane by enabling assistance to be delivered pre-emptively, thereby challenging the established model where humanitarian intervention is triggered by visible human suffering. While this may be a reasonable long-term expectation, the study found that the transformative potential of AA is currently limited by insufficient dedicated funding, particularly for the operationalisation of established AA frameworks (often referred to as ‘fuel money’).

### **Close donor involvement in promoting AA may lead to unintended policy consequences**

Another key finding was that close donor involvement in promoting AA may lead to 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 has played a crucial role in piloting and institutionalising the approach. However, interviewees suggested that this level of donor commitment can create pressure on humanitarian organisations to prioritise AA in their everyday work. Over time, this could result in the anticipatory approach being favoured even when traditional aid provision may be more appropriate. The study therefore calls for more data and rigorous research to better understand the relationship between AA funding and traditional humanitarian response finance.

The paper’s discussion and findings are based on original interview evidence, gathered over an extended period of dedicated research. The resulting data is representative of the views of humanitarian professionals based in Germany who have expertise in climate- and AA-related issues. However, caution is warranted when it comes to generalising the paper’s findings too broadly. For one, the data is limited to natural hazards and does not explore the applicability of AA in conflict-affected settings. Secondly, the perspectives of local and grass-roots humanitarian actors are not included. Also missing are the views of key UN organisations, some of which have been instrumental in researching and promoting AA in international policy fora. These include the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and UN the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The third research limitation relates to the Germany-specific nature of the paper’s discussion. As one of the main drivers of AA in its current form, Germany stands out for its active commitment to the topic. This influence is reflected in the views of the respondents, most of whom tended to view AA as a logical next step in the humanitarian reform process. Had the research included a wider geographic scope, it would likely have captured a broader range of perspectives.

With these limitations in mind, the paper offers the following recommendations. For humanitarians, it **encourages aid organisations to continue integrating AA and other risk-informed activities into their everyday work**. At the same time, **organisations should remain realistic in their expectations regarding the transformative power of AA**. While it holds the potential to significantly influence humanitarian thought and practice in the long term, this capacity is currently constrained by the limited availability of operational, pre-arranged funding. Thirdly, **aid organisations should ensure that AA remains complementary to their reactive response activities**. This includes continuing to actively engage with Germany and other key funders on AA-related topics while insisting on traditional aid provision where relevant and necessary.

For donors, the paper finds it crucial to ensure that earmarked funding and other investments in AA do not unnecessarily hinder needs-based humanitarian aid delivery. More specifically, **donors should ensure that funding for AA is both sufficient and additional to their existing ODA commitments**. Secondly, **they should work towards increased autonomy and independence for aid organisations engaged in AA activities**, including by providing more fuel money that aid organisations are free to use as they see fit. Finally, **donors should endeavour to improve the transparency of AA funding and reporting practices**. Where possible, they should apply internationally agreed terminology and follow standardised reporting practices. Donors not yet doing so are encouraged to participate in ongoing efforts to improve these processes, including the Grand Bargain caucus for scaling up anticipatory action.

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.un.org/en/content/action-agenda-on-internal-displacement/climate-related-disasters.shtml>
- 2 <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/overview/2024>
- 3 For further information and examples on triggers, see the Anticipation Hub Trigger Database. Available at: <https://www.anticipation-hub.org/experience/triggers/trigger-database/trigger-list>.
- 4 <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/our-work/focus-areas/humanitarian-assistance/anticipatory-action>
- 5 <https://www.aktiongegenhunger.de/arbeitsbereiche/innovation-forschung/meriam-vorausschauende-humanitaere-hilfe>
- 6 <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/our-work/focus-areas/humanitarian-assistance/anticipatory-action>
- 7 For further information, see Grand Bargain political caucus to scale up anticipatory action: Problem definition and caucus strategy. Available at: [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Caucus\\_AA\\_Problem\\_definition\\_and\\_strategy\\_final\\_version.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Caucus_AA_Problem_definition_and_strategy_final_version.pdf)
- 8 [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD\(2025\)6/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2025)6/en/pdf)
- 9 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/04/17/what-new-funding-data-tells-us-about-donor-decisions-2025>
- 10 <https://devpolicy.org/burden-shedding-the-unravelling-of-the-oecd-aid-consensus-20250307/>
- 11 [https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/Key\\_Messages\\_Why\\_Invest\\_in\\_OCHA\\_and\\_its\\_Pooled\\_Funds\\_0.pdf](https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/Key_Messages_Why_Invest_in_OCHA_and_its_Pooled_Funds_0.pdf)

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