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ANTICIPATORY ACTION IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT *Global and Regional Developments*

*Developments in science and technology allow us to better predict natural hazards and their likely impact. In theory, this means that governments and humanitarian organisations can plan their responses accordingly. This has provided tailwinds for the scale-up of anticipatory action in the humanitarian and development spaces, both in ASEAN and globally. **CHRISTOPHER CHEN** argues, nevertheless, that there are still important questions surrounding the extent to which anticipatory action has been operationalised in Southeast Asia.*



As damage of this type resulting from Typhoon Odette becomes more frequent, anticipatory action will be increasingly necessary to optimise humanitarian response. *Photo by Carl Kho on Unsplash.*

The Asia-Pacific has often been labelled the most disaster-prone region in the world. Against this background, new technological developments allow for ever more accurate risk-informed early action prior to natural hazards, health crises, and

conflicts. However, risk analysis, forecasts, and early warning systems (EWS) are only as effective as the socio-economic and -political systems they exist in.

For example, on 23 May 2022, tidal flooding, while predicted, was not followed by appropriate action, thus affecting over 8,000 people in Semarang, Indonesia. Despite the [severity](#) of the flood, residents were not evacuated to shelters. The EWS had been functional; yet, there was a lack of sensitive and coordinated response by authorities and the public. Hence, early warnings were not reliably translated into effective anticipatory action to forestall the negative impact of the flood. This highlights the need to strengthen disaster governance processes and systems at all levels of society. Technology alone is insufficient to reduce the impact of natural hazards.

Recent Developments

[Anticipatory action](#) is a set of interventions by an individual or organisation before an anticipated disaster, based on a forecast, early warning, or pre-disaster risk analysis, in order to mitigate its impact on the people, assets, and infrastructure likely to be affected. This can take the form of the distribution of cash or in-kind items, or targeted action such as the strengthening of shelters, or the evacuation of people and assets before the disaster occurs.

Recent developments at the global level indicate a push towards the [scale-up](#) of early warning services. Anticipatory action pilots across the [globe](#) and in the [region](#) covered by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have demonstrated that they can help populations avoid and mitigate disaster loss, and protect vital assets by providing support before crises take place. This approach can be more effective, cost-efficient, and provide a dignified way of managing disaster risk.

The United Nations and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) will launch a US\$1.5 billion package to scale up early warning programmes and initiatives globally. This follows the [request](#) made by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in March 2022, for WMO to spearhead new initiatives to ensure that “every person on Earth is protected by early warning systems within five years”. At [present](#), only 40 per cent of WMO members have multi-hazard early warning systems in place.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN has recently released the [Framework on Anticipatory Action in Disaster Management](#), which represents a significant shift in how ASEAN plans to tackle the impact of natural hazards. The document lays out an action plan for ASEAN member states set through to 2025. It proposes practical steps by which policymakers and practitioners from the concerned sectors — social welfare, disaster risk management, agriculture and livelihoods, water and sanitation — may work together in building the necessary foundations for leveraging anticipatory action. It endeavours to ensure that early warnings are reliably translated into effective anticipatory action, to reduce the negative impact of natural hazards across the region.

Challenges and Limitations

While the anticipatory action discourse is very much in vogue, it is by no means a perfect solution. There are still gaps in implementation and operationalisation.

For instance, in recognising the benefits of targeted anticipatory action, the UN [Central Emergency Response Fund \(CERF\)](#) has taken on an increasing role in supporting the set-up and financing of anticipatory action pilots. One of its initiatives involved the release of funds for typhoon response, conditional upon the meeting of certain thresholds, to support the work of UN agencies and participating non-governmental organisations. However, the initiation of this anticipatory action faced [significant](#) challenges, most notably in the Philippines prior to Typhoon Odette making landfall in December 2021. Ironically, the emergency funds were not disbursed through the trigger mechanism in time as the thresholds were not sufficiently met, therefore hindering the humanitarian response to come. This example demonstrates the current early stage of technical development for effective anticipatory humanitarian action, and highlights the need to fine-tune such processes.

Moreover, anticipatory action is still woefully underfunded. According to a 2019 [report](#) by the Start Network, at least half of all humanitarian crises are foreseeable and predictable. Nonetheless, less than 1 per cent of humanitarian funding is currently allocated to anticipatory action, and the approach has [yet to be](#) integrated into many of the programming plans of humanitarian agencies. While the rhetoric has garnered a lot of attention, practical buy-in for anticipatory action seems to be progressing at glacial speed. The reality is that there are still significant gaps in the humanitarian financing system. Much of humanitarian funding is [reactive](#) and not pre-planned, and over 90 per cent is still channelled towards post-disaster response.

What Next for Anticipatory Action?

For anticipatory action to be a success, it needs more flexible and predictable funding, and to be further scaled up to cover more countries, populations, and a wider range of hazards.

Although there is increasing recognition of the importance of integrating protective, gender-responsive, and inclusive approaches in anticipatory action, these are not yet consistently applied across contexts and initiatives, thereby missing opportunities to ensure the participation of different members of communities. While the ASEAN framework does outline targeted action to build capacity in regional and national anticipatory action implementers with regard to the matters of protection, gender, and inclusion, ASEAN member states and the humanitarian sector need to ensure that these goals are met as quickly as possible, through constant monitoring, evaluation, and more importantly, sustainable funding mechanisms.

Furthermore, the pandemic is a wake-up call for the humanitarian community. The resulting global economic recession has contributed to widespread [funding shortfalls](#) for humanitarian aid. As such, to prepare for future crises, the risk of pandemic should be [integrated](#) into operational and strategic planning for more robust and anticipatory humanitarian response. These should involve deeper collaboration with local, academic, and scientific communities, and the private sector, to fine-tune anticipatory action. Knowledge sharing among all actors involved is essential if we are to share best practices and promote evidence-based learning across sectors.

Finally, anticipatory action must be part of a system-wide reform process that is people-centred, inclusive, accessible, effective, and financially sustainable. While

leveraging technological developments, such efforts should also be complemented by nimble sense-making on the ground, to translate early warnings into practical humanitarian action.

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