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Anticipatory Action: A Stop-gap Measure for Disaster Management

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SYNOPSIS

*As disasters continue to intensify and increase because of climate change, anticipatory action is gaining traction as a means of mitigating crises in under-resourced countries amid shrinking budgets. **S. NANTHINI** cautions humanitarian actors against getting swept up in this current wave of popularity and suggests they continue to invest in established disaster management mechanisms to ensure sustainable, long-term disaster recovery.*

COMMENTARY

The humanitarian impacts of a volatile climate are becoming increasingly felt on the ground, affecting millions of people around the world. In Southeast Asia – already one of the most disaster-hit regions in the world – [disasters are only set to increase](#) as the impacts of climate change intensify. As the frequency and intensity of disasters increase, so will the cost of emergency responses and the strain on budgets.

In response to this trend, the idea of anticipatory action has been increasingly gaining traction among humanitarian actors. With the advantage of doing more with less, anticipatory action has become a beacon of hope for under-resourced countries at a time of ever-shrinking budgets and ever-increasing disasters. However, there are concerns about the implementation of this approach, including a potential over-reliance on it as well as its varying levels of effectiveness in different types of disasters.

What is Anticipatory Action?

Anticipatory action – also referred to as early warning, early action and forecast-based action – refers to actions taken to protect people based on early forecasts or risk analysis *before* a disaster strikes. While early warning systems are not new, as seen in the use of predictive analytics to forecast geophysical hazards and hydrometeorological disasters, anticipatory action makes full use of current technological advancements and goes one step further. It aims to reduce the impact of disasters through a series of pre-planned and pre-financed actions.

These actions can include the distribution of equipment, cash transfers, early warning information and protection of infrastructure. When pre-planned triggers are met, these action plans are then implemented during that particular window of opportunity, ideally mitigating the impact of the disaster and reducing the quantum of resources needed during disaster response operations. Anticipatory action is therefore able to fill the gaps between disaster preparedness and disaster response.

Anticipatory Action in Practice

Anticipatory action has already been adopted by several humanitarian organisations, including the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). Since 2020, OCHA – in conjunction with the IFRC – has facilitated the [development of anticipatory action pilots in countries such as Bangladesh and Malawi](#). A subsequent evaluation of the pilot in Bangladesh highlighted the [positive effects of anticipatory cash transfers](#), such as improved nutritional intake as well as decreased post-disaster asset loss and damage for those who had been expected to experience extreme flooding.

Anticipatory action is not limited to the humanitarian sector. ASEAN launched its [Framework on Anticipatory Action in Disaster Management](#) in 2022 – the first time that anticipatory action had been highlighted in an intergovernmental regional framework. Although the need to include this approach in regional disaster management policies had been alluded to in previous other ASEAN documents, including the [ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response Work Programme 2021–2025](#) and the [ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook](#), the explicit integration of anticipatory action into the broader disaster management structure in ASEAN highlights its growing importance in the region. Although it is not binding, this framework will allow for a regional understanding of anticipatory action, further enhancing collaboration between the ASEAN member states. Importantly, it also allows enough flexibility for a more localised approach within each state – a necessity, considering the varying disaster management capabilities among member states.

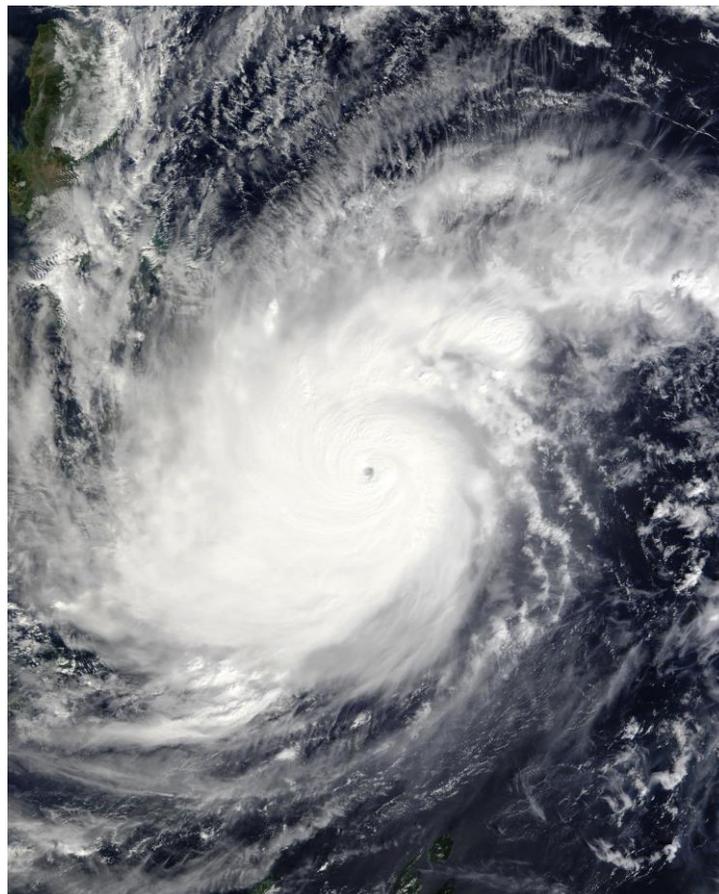
Limitations of Anticipatory Action

One concern about the use of anticipatory action is that the global spotlight on this approach might lead to over-reliance on it. While anticipatory action is useful in managing residual risks that cannot be, or have not been effectively, managed by established disaster management mechanisms, it is important to note that such action cannot take the place of the latter; anticipatory action can only be a stop-gap measure.

There is still a need to ensure investment in other areas of disaster management such as preparedness, risk reduction and recovery.

Moreover, those employing anticipatory action need to keep in mind that there are limits to this approach. The strength of this approach relies on the availability and functionality of an early warning mechanism. There is a need for ample lead time in order to effectively carry out anticipatory action. As such, in the case of hazards such as seismic disasters that cannot be forecast, or even those that can only be forecast during a limited window, such as tsunamis, the effectiveness of this approach is limited.

Another limitation of anticipatory action is that it may not always be possible to effectively provide a reliable understanding of the likelihood and effects of any oncoming disaster(s). This in turn might not enable certain triggers for action to be met. This was the case in OCHA's anticipatory action pilot in the Philippines during the typhoon season of 2021/2022. As the intensification of [Typhoon Rai/Odette from a Category 2 event to Category 5 took place in less than 12 hours before landfall](#), it did not meet the second stage activation trigger, which limited the distribution of OCHA's pre-planned and pre-financed actions.



Typhoon Rai/Odette struck the Philippines in December 2021 and was the second-deadliest disaster of the year. Although OCHA had put an anticipatory action plan in place, the typhoon did not meet certain activation triggers, limiting the distribution of the pre-planned actions. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Anticipatory action can be one remedy for this current period of seemingly ever-increasing crises and ever-decreasing budgets. However, there is a need to exercise caution against the over-promotion and potential over-reliance on this approach. While useful in filling the gaps between preparedness and response, the effectiveness of anticipatory action is still reliant on the quality of the data collected by early warning mechanisms. Only when anticipatory actions are taken in conjunction with other disaster management measures can the humanitarian impacts of climate change be mitigated over the long term.

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