

**WORKING DRAFT -
FOR COMMENT**



GETTING AHEAD OF CRISES: A THESAURUS FOR ANTICIPATORY HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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**Climate
Centre**



OCHA

United Nations Office
for the Coordination of
Humanitarian Affairs



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper, written by Sara de Wit, is the fruit of a collaborative search for a better understanding of language. At its heart are the insights of many interviewees who so generously gave up their time. The author's thanks go to Iliana Cardenes and Marwah Maqbool Malik for doing such a wonderful job in bringing order to the chaos. Comments from Greg Grimsich, Julia Wittig, Juan Chaves-Gonzalez, Felicity Le Quesne, Erin Coughlan de Perez and many others were invaluable. Many thanks also to Lisa Walmsley for the copy edits.

The paper was jointly commissioned by the Centre for Disaster Protection, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). It was delivered in partnership with the Forecasts for Anticipatory Humanitarian Action (FATHUM) project led by the University of Reading.

The Centre for Disaster Protection is funded by UK aid. It finds better ways to stop disasters devastating lives and economies by supporting low and middle-income countries to better manage disaster risk and to deliver earlier, more cost-effective support for people when disasters occur. Informing global policy and helping to shape the way money is programmed for disasters across the global development and humanitarian system is one area of the Centre's work.

The Climate Centre supports the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and its partners in reducing the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events on vulnerable people. The Climate Centre works at the intersection of policy, practice and science to make the best global scientific insights operable at the local level.

OCHA is the part of the United Nations Secretariat responsible for bringing together humanitarian actors to ensure a coherent response to emergencies. OCHA also ensures there is a framework within which each actor can contribute to the overall response effort. OCHA's mandate stems from General Assembly (GA) resolution 46/182 of December 1991, which states: "The leadership role of the Secretary-General is critical and must be strengthened to ensure better preparation for, as well as rapid and coherent response to, natural disasters and other emergencies".

FATHUM is a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)/UK Department for International Development (DFID) project funded under the Science for Humanitarian Emergencies and Resilience (SHEAR) research programme. FATHUM researchers are linking together research on forecast predictability and skill, complex drivers of risk, multi-actor perspectives on successful implementation and financing mechanisms to catalyse and facilitate the scale-up of Forecast-based Financing (FbF) for effective, appropriate and impactful action before a disaster.

This paper represents the views of its author and not necessarily of the commissioning organisations. It is a draft version that is being circulated for comment prior to final publication. The content of this paper should not be taken as final and constructive comments are welcome to the following email address. For more information, email info@disasterprotection.org.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DRR	Disaster risk reduction
EAP	Early action protocol
EWEA	Early Warning Early Action ¹
EWS	Early warning system(s)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FbA	Forecast-based Action ²
FbEA	Forecast-based early action ³
FbF	Forecast-based Financing ⁴
FFO	Federal Foreign Office (Germany)
GRC	German Red Cross
GFDRR	Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
OCHA	(United Nations) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
SOP	Standard operating procedure
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
WFP	World Food Programme

¹ Upper case when referring to an organisation-specific mechanism; lower case as a generic term.

² Upper case when referring to an organisation-specific mechanism; lower case as a generic term.

³ In this document FbEA is distinguished from the organisation-specific FbF and/FbA.

⁴ Upper case when referring to an organisation-specific mechanism; lower case as a generic term.

INTRODUCTION

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?

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, Sir Mark Lowcock⁵

The recent shift in humanitarianism from thinking in terms of response to anticipatory action has not only great intuitive appeal but there is also growing consensus on the value of acting early in terms of both cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Furthermore, it is widely agreed that the unprecedented availability of risk and forecasting information comes with a great responsibility and it is no longer acceptable to wait for hazards to drive communities into crises before acting.

As a new way of thinking and acting, this innovative approach comes with a new parlance and vocabulary. While the promise and practice of 'anticipation' and 'early action' is gaining momentum and might not sound like rocket science, a glance at the proliferation of new concepts—blended with old terms (see Annex: A field guide to getting lost)—is testament to the need for developing a shared understanding of how language is being used. Words are important: how they are chosen and the meanings they convey help to define assumptions and objectives, policies, programmes and interventions in relation to crises.

This thesaurus is intended to enable reflection on the similarities and differences in the way organizations use language associated with the concept of anticipatory humanitarian action. Its purpose is not to define terms but to facilitate mutual understanding and, thus, coordination and collaboration across the multitude of organizations operating in this space. This thesaurus is the result of an inter-institutional commitment between the UN Office for the

⁵ Lowcock, M. (2018). A Casement Lecture: A Collective Call Towards Innovation in Humanitarian Financing. Dublin.

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Centre for Disaster Protection, Forecasts for Anticipatory Humanitarian Action (FATHUM) and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre.⁶

The anticipatory humanitarian agenda is a new story that we tell about how to reduce or mitigate human suffering faster and more effectively. The basic paradigm shift is a move away from acting based on existing human *needs* (or suffering) to acting based on *risk* (and thus expected needs), which is underpinned by an informed idea of what the future might hold. A new way of thinking about temporality does not only go hand in hand with a new language but suggests a move towards new operational parameters for humanitarianism. This thesaurus intends to illuminate this trajectory by helping to address fundamental questions such as “What is the new narrative, and what is it that we are talking about and what we are not talking about, and what does that entail for our programming and finances?” (Donor interviewee).

As the etymology ‘treasury’ or ‘storehouse’ of knowledge captures, a thesaurus is not intended to be prescriptive but *descriptive*.⁷ It is inevitable—and often desirable—to have different approaches in any policy-making world. Therefore, this treasury of knowledge does not seek to impose uniformity but to serve as a tool to facilitate mutual understanding and to serve as a reference for day-to-day use to improve the policy debate on anticipatory action. The objective was to pull together the emerging vocabulary we use to raise more awareness of current concepts and approaches, clarify misinterpretation and confusion, and make everyone feel more comfortable in talking to each other and exploring the possibilities of anticipatory humanitarian action—together. Ultimately, the purpose of coordinating language better is to optimise and find the best response in any situation and overcoming unnecessary divides. Language is like water, fluid and changing continuously. This thesaurus is therefore only a beginning, a first attempt at a living tool to help open up, sharpen and navigate the dialogue.

⁶ The need for shared language and idea to develop some type of reference tool on anticipatory action was discussed at the Early Action Focus Task Force Technical Meeting during the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW) in Geneva (6 February 2019). OCHA, the Centre for Disaster Protection and the Climate Centre announced their commitment to take up the challenge

of developing a thesaurus during the ‘From Reaction to Anticipation’ workshop, co-convened by OCHA, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the Climate Centre later that month.

⁷ Etymology⁷ is the origin of a word and the historical development of its meaning. The word ‘thesaurus’ derives from the Greek word *thésauros*, which means a storehouse of precious items, or a treasure.

Developing this thesaurus has revealed that there is a great measure of consensus, especially on the ideological commitments and values related to anticipation as a general approach—hence the title, *Getting Ahead of Crises*. However, it has also brought some fundamental dilemmas, tensions, contradictions, confusion and vagueness to the fore; and questions that lie beyond the scope of this thesaurus where more exploration, learning and debating remain necessary. A brief analysis of the grey areas that remain unresolved accompanies this thesaurus as an invitation for further research and debate.

Methods

The 10 key words/terms included in this thesaurus—anticipation; preparedness; forecast; F(f)orecast-based F(f)inancing (FbF)/F(f)orecast-based A(a)ction; (FbA)/forecast-based early action (FbEA); early warning system(s) (EWS)/early warning early action (EWEA) ; early action; and early response—were selected collaboratively.⁸ The associated observations and reflections are based on: an extensive literature review of key policy documents and terms (see References and Annex); an analysis of speech acts, presentations and discussions; informal talks with key actors; and participant observation during expert meetings and global platforms. In addition, 25 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with humanitarians, risk analysts, scientists, donors, project managers and disaster risk managers.

In order to preserve confidentiality, interviewees remain anonymous and have been attributed very broad types of job function such as humanitarian (this might mean a desk officer who develops project proposals, a communication officer or a risk advisor, for example), NGO worker, expert (e.g. in a specific mechanism like FbF/EWEA/disaster risk), practitioner (working closely with local communities), scientist (hydro-meteorologist/hydrologist/meteorologist/forecast verification analyst/climate scientists) or donor. These are not such bounded or clear-cut categories: scientists might work for humanitarian organizations and donors might be considered humanitarians, for instance. It is also important to keep in mind that categories are much more heterogeneous than the comprehensive terms ‘scientist’ or ‘humanitarian’ allow.

⁸ There are ten words or terms and seven entries: it was not possible to distinguish some of the concepts and in these instances, words/terms share the same entry.

Thesaurus structure

The thesaurus entries are generally structured as follows:

- main usage and definitions—‘officially’ proposed definitions taken from organizational/inter-institutional policy documents and glossaries (sometimes inter-institutional)
- synonyms and terms used interchangeably
- related words
- near or total antonyms
- grey areas
- specialized terms
- useful references and resources.⁹

Quotes from different stakeholders bring nuance, confusions, grey areas and complexity to the fore. This attests to the fluidity and multiple usage of language and the discrepancies that can exist between words as ‘carved in stone’ and the messy reality of decision-making.

⁹ All entries have a main usage and definitions section and a synonyms section. Not all have the other sections.

THESAURUS

Anticipation

Main usage and definitions

Anticipatory humanitarian assistance

Used as a general term by the German Federal Foreign Office and others for humanitarian assistance that enables humanitarian organizations to better plan and act ahead of a crisis in addition to responding to it (GFFO).^a

Anticipatory action

Anticipatory humanitarian actions are actions taken in anticipation of a crisis, either before the shock or at least before substantial humanitarian needs have manifested themselves, which are intended to mitigate the impact of the crisis or improve the response. Anticipatory action is a proactive intervention, which takes place upon issuance of a warning or activation of a trigger. Effective anticipatory action requires robust forecasting and triggers/parameters linked to pre-agreed financing, along with risk monitoring and analysis, and ground truthing capabilities (OCHA).^b

An activity that takes place prior to an extreme weather event and based on forecast trigger, in order to mitigate the anticipated impact of food security, lives and livelihoods (WFP).^c

Anticipation

The expectation or prediction of a specific crisis that is likely to unfold, based on forecasting information (Start Network).^d

Crisis anticipation

Responding to signals of a looming crisis [...]. This includes forecasting and monitoring risks to act early and avoid unnecessary loss of life all over the world. Crisis anticipation can help funding to be accessed and projects to be implemented before a disaster is forecasted to strike, especially in the context of predictable disasters (Start Network).^e

Anticipation “Anticipation is probably the best umbrella term for early warning early action and forecast-based early action because it is more encompassing and also has an everyday meaning” (Humanitarian interviewee).

Synonyms and terms used interchangeably

Anticipatory action Anticipatory action is considered to be a synonym of early action; anticipatory actions are actions taken in anticipation of a crisis, which are intended to mitigate the impact of the crisis or improve the response (ODI).^f

“When we talk about early action, what we actually mean is anticipatory action and it is action that is implemented before an extreme event happens. [...] it’s about action that is based on a forecast and that is happening before an event materialises” (Donor interviewee).

“I would say anticipation is analogous to early action window—in that window you are anticipating an impact, which is the analysis [that] makes you take early action” (Humanitarian interviewee).

Crisis anticipation Crisis anticipation is a form of early and preventative humanitarian action (Start Network).^g

Related words

Anticipation “Anticipation is preventative or protective action, taken based on credible information; not just forecasts but also conflict mapping or other sources” (Humanitarian interviewee).

Anticipatory approach To 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 (OCHA).^h

Contingency planning	Contingency planning in the humanitarian sector is couched in the language of response. The plans take the form: <i>if X happens, then we will respond by doing Y</i> . In the context of early action for drought however, the plans must adopt the language of anticipation: <i>if we have a strong indication of X being likely, then we will do Z to offset the impact of X, before X happens</i> . ⁱ
Forecast-based Financing	“Within the Start Fund we have the anticipation window, which allows for the anticipation of risks, it is not FbF but it allows agencies on the ground to anticipate that something is going to happen, monitor risks at the time and to raise an alert to get some funding ahead of the impact” (Humanitarian interviewee).
Prevention	Activities and measures to avoid existing and new disaster risks. Prevention measures can also be taken during or after a hazardous event or disaster to prevent secondary hazards or their consequences, such as measures to prevent the contamination of water (GFFO). ^j
Near or total antonyms	
Conventional humanitarian response	“Conventional humanitarian response really begins with the <i>impact</i> of an extreme event and we’re trying to enlarge the disaster management cycle to more holistically encompass early action” (Humanitarian interviewee).
Delayed/late response	The human costs of late response to food insecurity are unacceptable. [...] Delayed response has been the defining characteristic of food emergencies over the last three decades in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. The humanitarian community has vowed to learn from its mistakes (Oxfam). ^k
Early response	Early response, however fast and timely, is a type of reactive intervention that is triggered after a hazard has occurred to address emerging or fully manifested humanitarian needs (OCHA). ^l

Resilience building

Anticipatory action is not general preparedness, resilience building or climate adaptation, as anticipatory action is in response to a specific relatively imminent high-probability shock (OCHA).^m

Specialized terms

Window of time/opportunity, alert, pre-guidance notes, anticipation cycle, anticipation window, cash-based programming, disaster risk financing, innovative financing.

Window of time/opportunity The time between a forecast and the predicted hazard. Forecasts, especially long-range, provide a window of opportunity to act in an anticipatory manner. Implementing the right intervention within the window of opportunity can fundamentally alter the impact of the forecasted shock (OCHA).ⁿ

References and resources

- a. GFFO, *Glossary of [early action] terms* (s.l., n.d.).
- b. OCHA, internal working papers of the Anticipatory Action Working Group, (s.l., n.d.).
- c. WFP, *Forecast-based Financing (FbF) – Anticipatory Actions for Food Security* (Rome, 2019).
- d. Start Network, *Start Fund Handbook 2017* (s.l., 2017a).
- e. Start Network, ‘Crisis Anticipation Window’, <https://startnetwork.org/start-fund/crisis-anticipation-window> (last accessed 8 May 2019).
- f. Pichon, F., *Anticipatory Humanitarian Action: What role for the CERF? Moving from Rapid Response to Early Action*, ODI (London, 2019).
- g. Start Network, *Start Fund Crisis Anticipation Window Annual Report 2017* (s.l., (2017b).
- h. OCHA, internal working papers of the Anticipatory Action Working Group, (s.l., n.d.).
- i. IFRC, *Early Warning Early Action – Mechanisms for Rapid Decision Making* (Nairobi, n.d.).
- j. GFFO, *Glossary of [early action] terms* (s.l., n.d.).
- k. Oxfam, *El Niño: the Case for Urgent Action* (Oxford, 2015).
- l. OCHA, internal working papers of the Anticipatory Action Working Group, (s.l., n.d.).
- m. Ibid.
- n. Ibid.

Preparedness

Main usage and definitions

Preparedness

The ability of governments, professional response organizations, communities and individuals to anticipate and respond effectively to the impact of likely, imminent or current hazards, events or conditions. [...] preparedness should apply to all kinds of emergencies, including from natural, biological, and technological hazards, and complex emergencies (IASC).^a

“For donors, preparedness means investing in systems that will allow national authorities and humanitarian organizations and communities to be aware of and anticipate risks, and allows them to deploy staff and resources quickly and effectively once a crisis strikes. Those may include early warning systems, ongoing risk and vulnerability assessment, capacity building, creation and maintenance of stand-by capacities, and the stockpiling of humanitarian supplies (UNISDR/OCHA)” (GFFO).^b

Preparedness is improved capacity (activities and measures taken in advance) to manage crises through developing forecasting, effective early warning and contingency plans (i.e. temporary evacuation of people and property from threatened locations). It includes early warning and decision support systems, response and relief. Preparedness activities also include strengthening the capacity of local organizations to plan for and respond to the effects of disasters (World Bank).^c

In the context of early action, preparedness is general, and done prior to anticipating a specific crisis (ODI).^d

“Preparedness is a long-term process but it is necessary for the early actions to take place. It took us 47 years to get the system in place that we have now in Bangladesh, after the devastating cyclone in 1971. Without the preparedness, you cannot do the early action, like the evacuations” (DRM Bangladesh).

Synonyms and terms used interchangeably

Emergency preparedness For the purpose of this [emergency preparedness] policy ‘preparedness’ and ‘emergency preparedness’ are used interchangeably and refer to anticipating, preparing for and taking pre-emptive action prior to an event, and planning early emergency response (WFP).^c

Readiness The related term ‘readiness’ describes the ability to quickly and appropriately respond when required (WFP).^f

Also: country-based early response; preparedness actions, contingency planning, resilience.

Related words

DDR Action taken to reduce the risk of disasters and the adverse impacts of natural hazards, through systematic efforts to analyse and manage the causes of disasters, including through avoidance of hazards, reduced social and economic vulnerability to hazards, and improved preparedness for adverse events (UNISDR) (GFFO).^g

Also: minimum preparedness actions; advanced preparedness, preparedness capacity and resilience.

Near and total antonyms

Early action(s)

“Preparedness is the precondition for early actions but they are not one and the same” (Donor interviewee).

The primary distinction with early action, which takes place in response to a specific and imminent shock or stress, is that preparedness activities are taken for as yet unknown threats that are likely to manifest in the future (ODI).^h

“Regular preparedness is also designed to anticipate potential disasters, but is based on the average level of risk, while early actions address a specific risk” (Donor interviewee).

Preparedness

Preparedness, when properly pursued, is a way of life, not a sudden spectacular programme (WFP).ⁱ

References and resources

- a. IASC, *Common Framework for Preparedness* (s.l., 2013).
- b. GFFO, *Glossary of [early action] terms* (s.l., n.d.).
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- e. WFP, *WFP Emergency Preparedness Policy: Strengthening WFP Emergency Preparedness for Effective Response* (Rome, 2017).
- f. Ibid.
- g. GFFO, *Glossary of [early action] terms* (s.l., n.d.).
- h. Pichon, F., *Anticipatory Humanitarian Action: What role for the CERF? Moving from Rapid Response to Early Action*, ODI (London, 2019).
- i. WFP, *WFP Emergency Preparedness Policy: Strengthening WFP Emergency Preparedness for Effective Response* (Rome, 2017).

Forecast

Main usage and definitions

Forecast

(Spanish – *Pronóstico*, Portuguese – *Previsão*)
A statement of expected meteorological and environmental conditions for a specified time or period, and for a specified area. It provides information about the possibility of an extreme event happening in the foreseeable future. Note: Forecasts are often divided into short-term weather forecasts (less than 10 days), sub-seasonal forecasts (20–40 days) and seasonal forecasts (3–6 months) (Climate Centre).^a

To estimate or predict conditions by analysis of data. For instance, the analysis of meteorological data to forecast the likelihood of specific weather conditions (Start Network).^b

A forecast is a prediction or estimate of future events, especially coming weather or a financial trend. [...] Weather forecasts provide information about the expected state of the weather up to 10–14 days in advance, while climate forecasts and outlooks provide information about the expected state of regional climate beyond the timeframe of long-range weather forecasts (~10–14 days) (ODI).^c

Synonyms and terms used interchangeably

Scientific information

“I also use the term ‘best available’, and I say ‘scientific information’. But when I say ‘scientific information’, I really mean information that is scientifically defensible” (Donor interviewee).

Also: hazard modelling, risk analysis, exposure risk mapping, satellite data, predicted needs, observations and ‘other forecasts’.

Related words

Impact-based forecasting

A forecast of the potential consequences of a hydrometeorological event, in terms of its effects on people, infrastructure, etc. (Climate Centre, German Red Cross and 510 initiative).^d

Impact-based forecasting, at its simplest, is the *translation* of hazard jargon into clear information about the likely impact. [...] Unlike objective weather, climate and hydrological forecasts, which can be developed with one or two disciplines, impact-based forecasts require access to a wide-range of new data including crowdsourced, behavioural and livelihood information, and the resilience of infrastructure systems and services (World Bank/GFDRR).^e

In particular, slow onset shocks that are relatively predictable could be better responded to using an anticipatory approach. This requires linking better data and forecasting methodologies to pre-agreed financing. Forecasts come in many forms, from raw data to bulletins from national meteorological services. In order for humanitarians to plan responses and take action, it is however necessary to link the hazard forecast to anticipated impact (i.e. from predicting above-normal rainfall to describing how flooding will affect a given community in a given area). One method to achieve this is impact modelling using predictive analytics” (OCHA).^f

Predictive analytics

Predictive analytics uses normal statistical techniques in combination with Artificial Intelligence to discover the very complex relationships between causal factors and humanitarian need (e.g. displacement or food insecurity) and so there is huge potential for predictive analytics to improve modelling of humanitarian impact (OCHA).^g

Also: credible warning; early warning, forecast threshold, forecast skill, ‘ground-truthing’, verification, exposure data, risk data, vulnerability assessments, disaster risk assessment, analysis and information.

Grey areas

Automated triggers based on scientific information are often placed in oppositional continuum to decision-making based on expert judgement (but reality is much messier—see Analysis section).

References and resources

- a. Climate Centre (Red Cross/Red Crescent), *Glossary of Terms for Forecast-based Financing* (s.l., n.d.).
- b. Start Network, *Start Fund Handbook 2017* (s.l., 2017a).
- c. Wilkinson et al., *Forecasting Hazards, Averting Disasters. Implementing forecast-based early action at scale*, ODI (London, 2018).
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- f. OCHA, internal working papers of the Anticipatory Action Working Group, (s.l., n.d.).
- g. Ibid.

Forecast-based F(f)inancing/ F(f)orecast-based Action

Main usage and definitions

Forecast-based Financing

An approach of anticipatory humanitarian assistance that enables access to humanitarian financing for the implementation of early actions in the context of natural disasters based on in-depth forecast information and risk analysis. The key element of FbF is that the allocation of financial resources is agreed in advance, together with the specific forecast threshold that automatically triggers the release of resources for the implementation of early actions. The roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in implementing these actions are defined in the Early Action Protocol (EAP). The FbF approach was developed by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in close cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO).^a FbF releases humanitarian funding based on forecast information for pre-agreed activities reducing risks, enhancing preparedness and response, and making DRR within the humanitarian assistance overall more effective (FAO).^b

FbF enables anticipatory actions for disaster mitigation at the community and government level using credible seasonal and weather forecasts. These forecasts are linked to pre-determined contingency plans, actors and funding instruments, which are used to reduce the humanitarian caseload in the critical window between a forecast and an extreme weather event (WFP).^c

Synonyms and terms used interchangeably

Early warning early action

EWEA, also known as Forecast-based Financing, which are interchangeable (FAO).^d

Forecast-based Action

“FbF and FbA are the same thing but it depends on what people want to emphasize” (FbF expert, see examples below).

“In our country [Bangladesh], I want to sell this as Forecast-based Action. [...] This is my question: is it the financing or the actions? In my case, I am comfortable to say ‘actions’, otherwise it is confusing. People think that only the finances will go, no also the actions!” (DRM Bangladesh).

“I prefer to use [the term] ‘FbF’, to get people to commit with resources. Otherwise, they simply won’t do it!” (FbF expert).

FbF is complementary. We will need to continue disaster risk reduction and response. In fact, we need all three to be effective. The best way to reduce suffering and build resilience will be to combine FbF, risk reduction and response (IFRC).^e

Forecast-based early action

“The use of climate *or* other forecasts to trigger funding and action prior to a shock or before acute impacts are felt, to reduce the impact on vulnerable people and their livelihoods, improve the effectiveness of emergency preparedness, response and recovery efforts, and reduce the humanitarian burden” (ODI).^f

Note that in the ODI study, Forecasting hazards, averting disasters: Implementing forecast-based early action at scale, FbA – as synonymous with FbF – is distinguished from the broader term FbEA, where the term ‘other forecasts’ can refer to a much broader range of analyses and monitoring data than forecasts based on meteorological and environmental conditions. While the FbF mechanism requires pre-agreed funding and scientific forecast information—in addition to vulnerability assessments and risk and exposure data—this is not necessarily the case for all FbEA initiatives.

Related words

Automation Can we set up an automatic system that triggers and funds preparedness actions before the disaster strikes when a credible warning arrives? (GFFO).^g

Also: disaster risk financing, automation, (see Grey areas, below), crisis risk financing, innovative financing, triggers, thresholds, standard operating procedures (SOPs)/early action protocols (EAPs).

Near and total antonyms

Early warning system “I suppose it goes on a spectrum, that on the extreme end you have an automated forecast-based action warning system in the way that the Red Cross is proposing, where the actions are pre-agreed on, the triggers are pre-agreed on, you have a good idea of the false alarm rate and it takes out the human decision. And then on the other end of the spectrum you have an early warning, like an early warning system, which can be formalized to a greater or lesser extent” (Climate scientist interviewee).

Regular preparedness Regular preparedness is also designed to anticipate potential disasters but is based on the average level of risk. FbF allows humanitarian agencies to scale up preparedness when science indicates the risk is elevated, as indicated by the early warning.

Time-critical response Time-critical response refers to necessary, rapid and time-limited opportunities for rapid injection of resources to save lives either in complex emergencies or after natural disasters, to minimize additional loss of lives and damage to social and economic assets (CERF).^h

Grey areas

Early warning system, forecast-based early action and forecast-based financing

“What is referred to here as FbA *overlaps with* other concepts such as early warning/early action and [...] FbF” (ODI).ⁱ

“In reality, we are not so automatic, but this is the general idea – that people pre-commit to taking early action, rather than being vague and hoping that when the warning comes someone will do something. [...] The human decisions are all done in advance, when people write the EAPs. They are just not done in the heat of the moment” (FbF expert).

They [FbEA] are similar in design to early warning systems [...] but FbA [here abbreviated as **FbEA**] mechanisms [...] place considerable emphasis on decision-making protocols, so actors know what to do on the basis of a forecast; on *ex ante* financing of early action; and by using cost-benefit analysis more rigorously to help promote *ex ante* investment in DRR (ODI).^j

“A further area of work is essentially our disaster risk financing pilots, which are much more similar to FbF and that does include model and data indicator development and triggering. It also includes contingency planning and pre-positioned financing; so guaranteed financing against specific triggers, and that’s a mixture of instruments, so there is a lot of overlap” (Humanitarian interviewee).

Specialized terms

Acting in vain

Some actions, like hand-washing campaigns before a flood, will have lasting effects that are beneficial to the community even if the extreme event does not materialize. These actions are written into the SOPs that establish who will do what when each forecast arrives. But because SOPs are just that—standard—disaster managers will not face any blame if the disaster does not materialize. The final result will be an institutional mechanism that improves the

effectiveness of humanitarian response. *It is important to note that while some definitions make a claim that acting in vain does not come at a real cost, during interviews it became clear that there are two opposing views among humanitarians, which are not always binary (see Analysis section).*

Uncertainty and acting on a no-regrets basis are inherent factors in using forecasts for anticipatory humanitarian action. A forecast can go wrong in two ways: predicting something that does not happen, which may lead to acting in vain (e.g. the town evacuated and there was no flooding), or failing to predict an event that happens (e.g. the town flooded, and no one could evacuate in time) (OCHA).^k

False alarm ratio (FAR)

Spanish - *Ratio de falsa alarma*, Portuguese - *Rácio de falso alarme*. The false alarm ratio is the fraction of the forecasts of the event associated with non-occurrences. $FAR = \frac{\text{false alarms}}{\text{number of forecasts of the event}}$. In FbF, this criterion is considered when analysing the reliability of the respective forecast.^l

Threshold

A threshold is the value of forecast probability at which the chances of reaching the impact level are considered high enough to initiate early actions. The probability is agreed upon beforehand amongst all stakeholders involved in early action. For example, the probability threshold of 100mm of rainfall during two days is 70% (GFFO).^m

Trigger

When a forecast exceeds both the impact level and the probability threshold it would trigger decision-making processes of financing of early actions. In the above example, a forecast 70% chance (threshold) of exceeding the impact level of 100mm rainfall in two days (impact level) is the trigger to decide on the disbursement of chlorine tabs, initiating evacuation and cash assistance), IFRC 2018 (GFFO).ⁿ

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- j. Ibid.
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- m. GFFO, *Glossary of [early action] terms* (s.l., n.d.).
- n. Ibid.

Early warning system(s)

Often used in conjunction with early warning early action (EWEA).

Main usage and definitions

Early warning system

The first component of the system produces the warning itself. The early warning system includes three components: a process to monitor indicators; a contextualized analysis of their values and trends; and the means to communicate these findings. Such systems can be based on local observations and traditional knowledge, or a highly technical approach based on analysis of remote sensing data. National early warning systems often combine elements from both these approaches (IFRC).^a

Early warning

The provision of timely and effective information, through identified institutions, that allows individuals, responders and decision-makers exposed to a hazard to take action to avoid or reduce risks and prepare for effective response (ISDR) (GFFO).^b

An integrated system of hazard monitoring, forecasting and prediction, disaster risk assessment, communication and preparedness activities, systems and processes that enables individuals, communities, governments, businesses and others to take timely action to reduce disaster risks in advance of hazardous events (UN, 2016).^c

The early warning is the bedrock of the system, the foundation on which all the other components are built. The information and analysis it provides must have the confidence of its users. EWS produce predictions, alerts and warnings. They should be held accountable for the predictions they produce and each system should be measured in terms of its predictive capacity. This will strengthen confidence, increase transparency, and provide opportunities for learning between countries. The system should be transparent, with public access to the raw data and the post-analysis products (World Vision and IRICS).^d

Multi-hazard early warning systems (also referred to as **holistic EWS**)

Multi-hazard early warning systems address several hazards and/or impacts of similar or different type in contexts where hazardous events may occur alone, simultaneously, cascadingly or cumulatively over time, and taking into account the potential interrelated effects. A multi-hazard early warning system with the ability to warn of one or more hazards increases the efficiency and consistency of warnings through coordinated and compatible mechanisms and capacities, involving multiple disciplines for updated and accurate hazards identification and monitoring for multiple hazards (UN, 2016).^c

Synonyms and terms used interchangeably

Early action

EWS is often used in conjunction with **early action**:

- an early warning has no effect without early action (IFRC).^f

EWS are much more than the data collection and analysis. Effective EWS include the collection and analysis of EW data, the translation of EW information into EA through clearly defined decision-making, systems and procedures and recommendations for EA for a range of stakeholders (World Vision and IRICS).^g

Early warning early action

“For the last couple of years, I have been making a point of saying ‘early warning, early action systems’. [...] An EWS without action is worthless. [...] We want to take action and have thought about it before that extreme event hits, that’s the whole point” (EWEA expert interviewee).

References and resources

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Early action

Main usage and definitions

Early action is defined in relation to different objectives and parameters across different organizations.

– *The timing or impact of the event (in relation to the type of hazard)*

Early action

Early action is an activity taking place *between* an early warning trigger or a high-probability forecast and the actual occurrence of the corresponding disaster in order to mitigate or prevent the humanitarian impact of the anticipated disaster (CERF).^a

Early action is defined as actions taken in response to a trigger but before an emergency hits, which are intended to mitigate the impact of a crisis or improve the response. This may include prevention, preparedness, social protection or mitigation measures – the key defining feature is the *timeframe* (ODI).^b

“Early action is in relation to human suffering. Response is the moment in which people suffer, and then you react. But with early humanitarian action, you act before people suffer” (Donor interviewee).

– *Baseline*

Early action(s)

“Early action is relative to a baseline of what organizations already have been doing. So what we mean by ‘early’ depends on the time it normally takes. So early is kind of an improvement on that. And it is also [...] related to the type of hazard of how early that action will be, will depend very much on how long it takes, whether the event is rapid or slow onset” (Humanitarian interviewee).

– *Forecast information*

Early action “Early action has to be based on a forecast, otherwise how do you justify your actions?” (Donor interviewee).

– *Objective*

Early action “What is different between early response and early action is your objective. [...] Are you trying to help people adapt and to avoid losses? Or in response are you trying to respond to the fact that they’ve accumulated loss and you don’t want them to accumulate more loss after the impact?” (Humanitarian interviewee).

Synonyms and terms used interchangeably

Also: anticipatory action, rapid response, early response, timely response, no-regret action.

Near or total antonyms

Response Any ‘humanitarian’ response to a slow-onset disaster is a late response. Early action is a paradigm shift for people and agencies which have grown accustomed to equating humanitarian action with crisis response. Communities which have adopted this paradigm shift appreciate the opportunity to make decisions about how to avoid recurrent extreme losses.^c

Is it [your intervention] intended to support genuinely early action – taken ahead of an impending shock to reduce its impact, based on forecasts/predicted needs – or simply a faster, more timely humanitarian response based on actual needs? (Oxfam).^d

Early action means ‘different’, not just ‘earlier’. The early actions being discussed here are not traditional humanitarian activities, although they need to be undertaken with a humanitarian sense of urgency.^e

“For me, distributing alternative or drought-resistant seeds is exactly an example of a ‘non-humanitarian action’ and does not qualify as ‘early action’. We work on this within development cooperation. That is rather about resilience of food security systems” (Donor interviewee).

“The role of the Red Cross is essentially early action and immediate response, first responders. But when people are going to live in evacuation sites or camps for weeks or months at a time, the responsibility is *not* to maintain those camps. That becomes more under the umbrella of something like civil protection and the food supplies and those issues” (FbF expert interviewee).

Grey areas

The difference between early action(s) and early response:

- “It could be that we transform early action into response, it probably happens gradually” (Humanitarian interviewee).
- “Officially we say it’s between the forecast and the event. But what do you call the event? You know, for certain things you could say it’s before the event has an impact. For example, the cholera doesn’t break out right the moment the flooding starts; it impacts a few days after so it could still be early action if you act the moment the rain starts, or even the flooding starts but before actually the impact that you are working on occurs. At what point is a flood a disaster?” (Humanitarian interviewee).
- “For us early action is a little bit broader [than just actions] because it is also about doing the preparedness for effective response. That doesn’t mean that it is to respond, but it means that we can put any funding to the volunteers or the national societies itself are really well ready to be able to deal with that response. These are like grey areas. [...] Our FbF investment in the system is [...] not just about the actions but it is about the whole system” (Humanitarian interviewee).
- Often used in conjunction with early warning, the term [early action] refers to either preventive and mitigative action or ‘early response action’ (IFRC/FFO).^f
- Humanitarian actions, typically take place in the ‘early action’ and ‘early response’ phases.^g

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- e. IFRC, *Early Warning Early Action – Mechanisms for Rapid Decision Making* (Nairobi, n.d.).
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- g. Pichon, F., *Anticipatory Humanitarian Action: What role for the CERF? Moving from Rapid Response to Early Action*, ODI (London, 2019).

Early response

Main usage and definitions

Early response

Actions taken directly before, during or immediately after a disaster in order to save lives, reduce health impacts, ensure public safety and meet the basic subsistence needs of the people affected (UNISDR) (GFFO).^a

We use early response to refer to more timely humanitarian response (ODI).^b

“We have anticipatory action, which is action taken before a hazard occurs based on forecast information. Then there is early response, which is activities that take place after a hazard occurs but very early, earlier than traditional humanitarian response” (Humanitarian interviewee).

From a crisis alert being raised, specific project funds are transferred within 72 hours. Responses, subsequently, last for 45 days, to provide an early response, often before other funding mechanisms become available (Start Network).^c

Near or total antonyms

Early action

“We don’t use [the term] early action, we actually say ‘early response’. Early response is to refer to a couple of programmes that we have that basically react faster to the losses that are coming from a natural hazard than traditional humanitarian response (Humanitarian interviewee, WFP).

References and resources

a. GFFO, *Glossary of [early action] terms* (s.l., n.d.).

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ANALYSIS: LANGUAGE USE IN A COMPLEX CONTINUUM

Despite the varying terms and definitions across the range of organizations, it has become clear that there is an increasing common ground and appreciation of the *value* of anticipatory approaches. However, there is much less attention, transparency and clarity around the limits and boundaries of what forecasts and forecast-based approaches can and should do. This is where language becomes important because the fields of DRR, sustainable development and humanitarian response form part of an increasingly complex continuum. Hence contradictions and semantic struggles remain, which require reflection and further analysis.

This thesaurus is by no means exhaustive and many of the questions that have emerged are beyond scope of this analysis. The following section aims to distil some of the questions and the contours of the debate.

How do terms relate?

One of the key lessons that emerged from developing this thesaurus is that there are many grey areas in terms of terminology—and different approaches are not necessarily contradictory but:

- complementary (e.g. FbF, DRR and traditional response)
- encompassing (e.g. anticipation as an umbrella term, an approach and a concrete action)
- are an enabling environment or precondition for something else (e.g. preparedness is a precondition for effective early action)
- overlapping (e.g. preparedness is part of DRR)
- gradual (e.g. where does early action begin and end?).

The blurred categories hold true for both longer and shorter term approaches and immediate timescales (development and response). As one donor paraphrased: “Better early action will lead to more effective response because things are already moving”. Therefore, the pursuit of finding common definitions hides a risk of fixating meaning in ways that are not always necessary or fruitful (i.e. does it matter if actions are either called readiness or preparedness? A valuable lesson here is perhaps rather to find ways to be

comfortable with overlapping meanings and flexibility of terms.¹⁰ This reflects both the nature (and limits) of language and the messy reality of hazards and disaster risks, which are rarely clear-cut. For example, many informants explained that reacting to slow-onset disasters like droughts is very challenging because of the complex nature of the hazard, which is difficult to predict and track. The effects of droughts manifest over long and variable timeframes, and the impact of a drought is slow in revealing itself fully. Furthermore, in rapid-onset events, the question of when impacts are felt and where needs begin (and end) are also not always easily defined. For the same reason, there was widespread consensus among interviewees, (including donors) that efficient use of existing funds and more flexible funding mechanisms are desirable.¹¹

Timeliness and quality of action

Precise language begins to matter for the effectiveness of action when quality, timeliness and objectives are not clear—and when old practices are cast in new language as it undermines the power of novelty. Of all the emerging terminology and concepts across the anticipatory linguistic spectrum the terms ‘early action’ and ‘early response’ have undoubtedly sparked most misunderstanding, confusion and controversy. Key questions that deserve further reflection and analysis include:

- are early actions different or just earlier than response actions (and why does this matter)?
- where does early action begin and end? (for example, can capacity-building be a form of early action, or does it sit too far off the ex ante side (to become DRR or development), and when is response too far off the ex post side?)
- early in relation to what (own baseline, other humanitarian response and mechanisms, the event itself, or impact of the event)?

While these questions relate to the timing and quality of the actions, they ultimately revolve around the more fundamental and underlying questions:

- where to locate the interventions on the temporal continuum
- whether the interventions align both with the humanitarian principles and imperative to help those in need.

¹⁰ These findings are in line with the ODI study, *Anticipatory Humanitarian Action: What role for the CERF? Moving from Rapid Response to Early Action* (London, 2019).

¹¹ For example, Mark Lowcock’s Casement lecture: “We need the right mix and sequencing of humanitarian and longer-term recovery and

development financing, and to breakdown financial siloes between the international development and humanitarian finance systems”. There are different opinions around the question whether there is a need for more (i.e. additional) funding mechanisms that are flexible or for funding mechanisms to be more flexible.

In other words, questions around temporality have moral implications for finding a common understanding of when decisions are taken and actions planned, how you justify those choices, and how they can be funded. As one donor formulated it: “With early action you are moving towards development cooperation, which is not within the expertise or mandate of humanitarians. [...] But if we know that these models are a public good, and validated, we can trust them and act on that basis”.

The parameters for early action are defined and used differently across organizations, contexts and hazards; yet the question is not so much about whether early action and anticipatory action are the same thing (they can be). However, the difference between for instance early action and response carries a more complicated political load. It is important to clarify what you mean when these terms are used in relation to:

- forecast information (the type of models, data and forecasts used and how are they validated)
- the timing of the actions (before, during or after an event?)
- the objective of the intervention (to prevent or mitigate crisis impact, reduce suffering, build resilience or save lives?).

How can we explain the use of different terminology?

It will come to nobody’s surprise that terminology is shaped by each organization’s history, mandate and ideological commitments. Furthermore, it is important to note that both language and actions are informed and shaped by infrastructural and operational capacity and expertise. As one interviewee explained:

“You can’t expect other agencies to just take the model and implement it. I am a very different institution. I don’t have the same resourcing, I don’t have the same climate scientists working alongside me. So I need to adopt it and understand my own organization and implement it that way”
(NGO worker).

Against a backdrop of new concepts and approaches, the question of how to invest in building consensus around terminology, while simultaneously adding

value, is key. And it is in the conversations with each other that you define yourself. While humanitarian organizations operate in a shared space, a lot of work goes into ‘adding value’ and distinguishing themselves from each other in unique and innovative ways.¹²

Furthermore, language use and preferences can vary *within* organizations, as well as across them. Use can depend on both individual preferences and contexts. For example, the motives of, and stakes for, a policymaker at the international level seeking to leverage funding are very different from a practitioner on the ground who wants to manage the expectations of the local communities. Another element that adds complexity is that sometimes different terms can mean the same thing—but not always. For example, EWEA and FbF can mean the same thing but not every EWS is necessarily FbF. In other words, while these concepts are used interchangeably, the FbF language has been from its design stage focused on the novelty of automation (reducing the need for decision-making as much as possible), combined with the use of pre-agreed funding. But this level of pre-agreed finances and automation are not always inherent to an EWEA system.

In a similar vein, the generic term ‘forecast’ does not reveal much about the extent to which science plays a role, or the varying degrees of automation and expert judgement that underpin different stages in different approaches. Finally, because forecasts take centre stage in the anticipatory agenda, the language around probabilities, timing and acting in vain does not just touch upon scientific and financial questions. Anticipating the future entails a political redefinition of responsibility; it casts new light on the question ‘Who is in need?’.

Therefore, it is important to continue to ask what a credible warning or forecast means and what purpose they serve. And because words are never neutral, choices deserve careful reflection about the ways in which terminology is used and employed.

¹² Krause, M., *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason* (Chicago, 2014).

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ANNEX: A FIELD GUIDE TO GETTING LOST

Advanced humanitarian readiness

Advanced preparedness actions

Alert (note)

Anticipation

Anticipatory programme design

Anticipatory response

Capacity building

Capacity-strengthening efforts

Community level readiness

Coordinated assistance

Crisis anticipation

Disaster preparedness

Disaster risk financing (DRF)

Early action

Early adaptive action

Early response intervention

Emergency plan of action

Emergency preparedness planning

Emergency response preparedness

Emergency response plan

Early protective action

Early collaborative risk analysis

Early intervention

Early response

Early response action

Early warning early action (EWEA)

Early warning system(s)

First response

Forecast

Forecast based-action (FbA)

Forecast-based early action (FbEA)

Forecast based-Financing (FbF)

Forecast-based preparedness

Forecast-based project design

General preparedness actions (GPA)

Impact-based forecasting (IbF)

Immediate disaster preparedness action

Innovative financing

Minimum Preparedness Actions (MPA)

Mitigation

Operational readiness

Operational preparedness

Rapid response

Readiness

Regular preparedness (also general preparedness)

Residual risk

Response actions

Risk informed programming

Risk-based Financing

People centred early warning

Preparedness

Preparedness action plan

Prevention

Scenario-based contingency planning

Timely response

Trigger

Trigger-based early action

Win-win actions

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?

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, Sir Mark Lowcock