

Anticipatory Action Pilot in Ethiopia: Process learning on partnership and design

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Presentation Outline

Introduction

Learning approach and methodology

Overarching Lessons

Learning themes

1. Partnership and collaboration
2. Intervention design
3. Operational readiness
4. Beyond the pilot

Conclusion



Introduction (1 of 2)

Since 2018, the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF), the financing arm of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has explored anticipatory action (AA) funding to complement traditional humanitarian response.

A series of pilot projects are strengthening evidence on AA's benefits in mitigating human suffering and the cost of response. OCHA continues to develop its role in catalyzing a global shift toward more anticipatory response to disaster. Twelve pilots are underway, including one triggered in Ethiopia for drought in 2021.

This report offers learning themes intended for all those involved in the Ethiopia AA pilot (OCHA HQ, OCHA Ethiopia, and partner UN agencies), as well as others interested in further developing AA.

The Centre for Disaster Protection has provided advising and support on strategies to capture and understand the critical learning emerging from these AA pilots



Introduction (2 of 2)

The Ethiopia pilot offers three primary possibilities to enhance global learning on the benefits and challenges of developing AA Frameworks:

- 1. Learning from the process** to put in place AA plans, and the key benefits and challenges
- 2. Monitoring of key indicators** by partner agencies on the delivery of timely support to at-risk households when actions have been triggered
- 3. Impact evaluation** to understand the results of triggered actions in terms of household welfare

The focus of this report is here

"As we innovate more, try to use data better and anticipate problems before they occur, we need to analyse what is working and what is not. And we need to be honest about the lessons."

- USG Mark Lowcock
(December, 2019)



Approach to process learning

AA pilots are intended to offer new and better ways of thinking about, planning for and implementing humanitarian action. There is a strong focus on innovation and learning.

This takes courage, persistence, and humility. The following points are central to the approach and mindset of process learning:

- **Easy solutions rarely exist** for challenges that arise in promoting a new way of operating within highly complex systems
- **Learning and progress occur by incrementally navigating** and testing how to balance requirements and trade-offs
- The learning presented here is best understood as **focus areas for further inquiry, discussion, decision-making and adaptation** as future projects unfold

"Everyone in a complex system has a slightly different interpretation. The more interpretations we gather, the easier it becomes to gain a sense of the whole."

- Margaret Wheatley



Process learning methodology

1. **Desk review of relevant documents**
2. **Observation** of bi-weekly OCHA roll-out team meetings
3. **Qualitative interviews:**
 - HQ and in-country OCHA/CERF colleagues (5)
 - Clusters coordinators and partner UN-agencies, including FAO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR (10)
 - International NGOs (2)
4. **Action learning discussion** with six (6) in-country colleagues



Overarching Lessons

- The pilot in Ethiopia continued to **build momentum and understanding of how to design collective AA** to mitigate the impact of drought on human lives. It built significantly on lessons learned from the Somalia AA pilot.
- Under very difficult circumstances, the **clusters designed a comprehensive AA plan** with the support of OCHA Ethiopia and OCHA HQ, which was endorsed in November 2020. The plan was activated in two tranches, in December 2020 and April 2021. Implementation continued through September 2021. Details on the plan and its activation can be found on the [CERF website HERE](#).
- Learning suggests strong coordination and a transparent design process, though there is a need for greater input from those close to the ground, to confirm **operational feasibility within given lead times, engagement of affected communities, and increased inter-cluster communication.**



LEARNING THEMES

1. **Partnership and Collaboration**
2. **Intervention Design**
3. **Operational Readiness**
4. **Beyond the Pilot**



1. Partnership and collaboration

Process:

With backing from Ethiopia's UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, OCHA Ethiopia's AA team briefed key stakeholders on the concept, the goals of the pilot, how the process would look, and the given timeframes. They presented to various groups, including the Humanitarian Country Team, the UN Country Team, and the Inter-cluster Coordination Group.

With support from OCHA HQ on the technical approach and associated tools, the OCHA Ethiopia team worked closely with cluster coordinators for nutrition, protection, agriculture, health, WASH, and education, to sensitize them on how the pilot would unfold.



Learning from partnership and collaboration (1 of 4)

Consistent and intentional stakeholder engagement efforts on the part of OCHA generated wide-spread support and cluster-level technical inputs

- OCHA provided many engagement opportunities in stakeholder forums, such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), and cluster meetings to build understanding of the AA pilot, to receive feedback, and generate support.

Intentionally engaging with leaders from a wider set of non-UN agencies on a consistent basis may have expedited the framework approval process

- The International NGO Humanitarian Community (HINGO) Directors raised concerns at the time of endorsement, causing delays that prevented endorsement before a first window of action. Concerns included:
 - The AA framework was directly tied to CERF funding, which only goes to UN agencies
 - Lack of clarity about how implementing partners (IPs) would be selected for AA
 - Communities and local NGOs were not adequately consulted in the process
- This situation illustrates the challenge of balancing the time and political capital to integrate the pilot across a broader range of stakeholders, while aiming to quickly catalyse the benefits and learning needed.



Learning from partnership and collaboration (2 of 4)

Additional in-country human resources would be supportive to build understanding of AA, and to design and roll out the pilot

- Multiple interviewees (from the in-country AA team, cluster coordinators, and agency leads) expressed the challenge of doing the pilot in addition to their existing work, though they very much saw the importance of it.
- There was significant ongoing support from the OCHA HQ team, though interviewees called for additional in-country support in building understanding of the concept.
- The pilot took more time than anticipated, in a context of multiple unfolding crises demanding urgent attention and response.
- One interviewee stated: *“It's not fair to expect people who are already extremely busy to introduce an innovative idea. That requires dedicated minds and time, and this was one of the challenges we faced.”*
- This can be particularly true if those working on the pilot do not have prior experience with or specific knowledge of AA, as learning and integrating new ways takes time.



Learning from partnership and collaboration (3 of 4)

Partners see AA as a valuable opportunity for more multi-sectoral collaboration and collective action, though the promise of this was not fully realised during this first pilot

- Interviewees expressed appreciation for the multi-sectoral impetus behind AA, and the important effort of bringing UN actors together to collaboratively address resilience and disaster mitigation.
- Interviewees also called for even greater collaboration and coordination across clusters: from early engagement, through to intervention design and targeting.

Ongoing attention is needed to address the risk of AA being experienced as a ‘top-down’ initiative, and to generate the benefits of a process that builds strong in-country ownership

- Multiple interviewees expressed a sense that the AA pilot was an HQ-driven initiative, with pressure to implement quickly, when the framework activation happened at a difficult time.
- The roots and risks of this dynamic (including those noted in IFRC’s [*Evaluation Report of OCHA’s Anticipatory Action Trigger: Ethiopia*](#)) are important to explore, along with what changes to the design process could further a sense of in-country ownership.



Learning from partnership and collaboration (4 of 4)

It is important to manage expectations of what the success of AA looks like in an underfunded humanitarian context

- Humanitarian crises, due to drought and other threats, were already unfolding in the targeted regions, compounded by long-term vulnerabilities that communities have been facing for years. In such a context, messaging is crucial to explain how AA relates to the ongoing response, how it is ideally part of a continuum, and what it can or can't achieve.
- This can be quite difficult when activities are similar in nature to a traditional response (though timed differently), and if implemented when the situation is already very serious.

In a country the size of Ethiopia, sensitizing stakeholders in the regions is critical

- Much of the sensitization and consultations by OCHA were at the national level; cluster coordinators then engaged their counterparts and technical agency leads in the regions.
- As the concept of AA was quite new, several cluster coordinators found it challenging to clearly explain it to their regional counterparts, and to sensitize them about the approach and process.
- One Area of Responsibility (AoR) lead within the protection cluster asked for greater support from OCHA in bringing the concepts of AA to the field level (for example, by organizing training workshops).



2. Intervention design

Process:

To kick-off the intervention design process, OCHA's pilot team facilitated workshops with the six clusters (health, nutrition, WASH, protection, education, and agriculture). Cluster coordinators then led the process of identifying impactful and feasible activities, and engaging with technical leads from the partners working within the clusters (including implementing partners). The cluster coordinators made final decisions about which interventions would be submitted to OCHA.

OCHA then engaged bilaterally to give feedback on proposals, ensuring that activities aligned with the mitigative intent and critical timeframes of AA. This also served to raise awareness among agencies about what could or could not be included.



Learning from intervention design (1 of 5)

Deliberate and transparent decision-making processes supported intervention selection

- OCHA offered informed recommendations on which interventions to include, but gave the final decision to the Cluster Lead Agencies (CLA), leading to more strategic level buy-in.
- This provided an opportunity for further discussion about the underlying logic of AA, and engaged an important wider in-country group, ensuring consistency in how the requirements were applied across interventions proposed by the agencies.

Affected communities need to be meaningfully consulted and engaged in the design process

- One of the benefits of up-front planning through AA is that it allows for greater participation and co-creation of solutions with affected communities. Meaningfully engaging communities in the design helps to ensure funds are spent on what households need, when they need it most.
- A lack of meaningful community consultation was named as a shortcoming of the design process undertaken in Ethiopia. In one person's words, *"Frankly speaking, we weren't good at engaging communities. They became targeted, as usual."*



Learning from intervention design (2 of 5)

It is important to clarify the relationship between the coordination function of the cluster, and the technical and operational inputs necessary from the lead agencies

- Some cluster coordinators and protection AoR leads described having limited operational knowledge for the agencies and regions for which they designed activities, making the plan development process challenging, given short timeframes.
- For some of those who did not also represent the lead agency (such as the GBV and child protection AoRs), this led to inefficiencies in the design phase, as they were intermediaries and didn't have the authority to make changes to the lead agency plans.
- For cluster coordinators who were from the lead AA agency (such as UNICEF for the nutrition cluster), this arrangement also created tension and questions about why CERF funds would go through that single agency.
- Given these challenges, it may be useful to create more opportunities for the coordination and technical agency functions of each cluster to come together, to work collectively with OCHA in designing and confirming AA interventions.



Learning from intervention design (3 of 5)

Continue exploring the trade-offs of designing sub-national plans (complexity vs granularity)

- Some interviewees described the challenge of designing appropriate and feasible interventions that would be relevant across diverse regions and livelihood zones.
- Those advocating for sub-national triggers and plans noted how operational feasibility and lead times differ greatly, depending on the region where AA would take place.
- However, OCHA noted the complexity of creating crisis timelines and plans for multiple seasons, opting for a national level plan that could be adapted to the realities in impacted regions once triggered; the benefits and trade-offs of each approach warrant ongoing exploration.

Consistently clarify and set expectations with partners about what is or isn't AA, and outline its relationship to resilience, disaster preparedness, and response activities

- OCHA Ethiopia was in close contact with the clusters throughout the design phase, and spent significant time clarifying AA and providing feedback on proposed interventions.
- Given the newness of the concept, misunderstandings still occurred about what could or could not be included in AA (such as food aid), with some partners advocating for early examples to illustrate what would constitute strong or weak AA interventions.



Learning from intervention design (4 of 5)

Ensure greater linkages between the trigger and proposed activities

- Consistent with findings from IFRC's *Evaluation Report of OCHA's Anticipatory Action Trigger: Ethiopia*, the process for identifying and selecting interventions could have been more closely integrated with the trigger design process.
- This would allow for greater feedback loops in defining how the trigger provides required information when it's needed, in order to trigger feasible and impactful activities.
- The process aimed to balance a simple and well-understood trigger, while accounting for the size and complexity of the country's livelihood zones – this meant that some of the specificity for how a trigger could be regionally contextualized was not captured.

The window for designing the AA framework in time to mitigate the impact of drought during the 2020/2021 rainy seasons led to a much-needed disbursement, and some trade-offs

- Thanks to the finalization and activation of the AA plan in late 2020/early 2021, Ethiopia received a disbursement of \$20million in CERF funds to mitigate a major food security crisis.
- However, some interviewees saw downsides to the initial short timeframe for creating the AA plan, including an inability to look at cash-based interventions within the nutrition sector and limited multi-sectoral coherence and integration across activities.



Learning from intervention design (5 of 5)

CERF-funded protection mainstreaming was successfully integrated into the AA framework, with opportunities to continue clarifying how to ensure its centrality in AA

- The protection mainstreaming project allowed for UNFPA, UNICEF and UNHCR to jointly train over 270 staff from AA implementing agencies and their partners.
- With this experience and those from other pilots, the timing may be good for establishing promising practices for how to ensure the centrality of protection in AA.
- As an example, protection AoRs advocated for close involvement with other clusters from the start of the design phase to advise on protection mainstreaming, integration of ‘do no harm’ principles, and to help clusters intervene in an equitable and inclusive way.
- AoRs expressed the importance of building understanding among non-protection actors for how protection uniquely fits in with AA.



3. Operational readiness

Early reporting on implementation, as well as observations made by interviewees, suggest delays in the roll-out of some AA activities.

Future learning will look specifically at lessons learned from implementation. However, qualitative interviews to-date suggest some lessons learned on building understanding of operational readiness early in the design of the pilot.

Learning from operational readiness (1 of 2)

Operational readiness was difficult for agencies to assess, with a need for greater input by regional technical partners and implementing agencies, early in the design phase

- Interviews suggest that important technical regional perspectives on the feasibility of selected interventions need to be more intentionally integrated across the clusters.
- Planning would ideally account for the capacity of implementing partners, their presence on the ground, and their existing community relationships – however, those designing the proposed interventions didn't always have this level of detailed information.
- Additionally, agency focal points found that attempts at advance planning with partners without knowing the exact timing, location or scale of the AA response in a highly dynamic environment made it challenging for partners to assess feasibility.
- UN agencies wanted to give more information to implementing agencies to prepare, but also understood that some things would remain undefined until the plan triggered.
- Given these challenges, OCHA communicated that plans could be adjusted to account for the realities at the time of activation, whilst recognising that this could take additional time.



Learning on operational readiness (2 of 2)

UN partner agencies must consider operational readiness across all teams involved in implementing the pilot, engaging them early to assess feasibility and give advance notice

- In addition to implementing partners, procurement teams and regional governments should all be consulted in assessing the feasibility of proposed AA interventions.
- Covid-19 led to unique challenges with procurement, which weren't always accounted for in the plan development; not all agency focal points consulted sufficiently from the start with their procurement teams and regional counterparts about what would be feasible.
- In its facilitative role, OCHA should continuously ensure that agency focal points fully assess operational feasibility within AA timeframes, with input from relevant teams and experts.
- Agencies must then be responsible for informing and giving advance notice to relevant teams.

In the long run, agency operations will need to adapt to be more flexible in order to avoid the typical humanitarian delays that could undermine the intent and impact of AA

- While cluster coordinators and technical agency leads understood the new logic and unique requirements of AA, this information didn't always reach implementing teams.
- Procurement, HR, partnership and other operations need time and further sensitization by partner agency leaders, to address typical delays in traditional humanitarian response.



4. Beyond the pilot

The pilot in Ethiopia led to significant learning, and generated momentum and enthusiasm for further developing AA. Interviewees advocated for ways to integrate it more fully within the humanitarian system.

The following lessons offer important considerations, as partners explore whether and how the promise of AA might be further realised and institutionalized in Ethiopia.



Beyond the pilot (1 of 1)

Global heads of UN agencies and senior management in-country are critical champions for continuing to develop and roll out high-quality AA

- The influence and support of agency heads and senior management are crucial, in order to change mindsets and build momentum for shifting modes of operating.
- For this pilot, sensitisation around AA in Ethiopia primarily took place at the level of the clusters, and via an *ad hoc* working group. Further sensitisation, buy-in and support among senior management would be critical to support broader changes in operational practices and attitudes needed for AA to sustain and scale in the future.

It's important to continue integrating AA with coordination systems and mechanisms already in place

- Signaling a desire to build on the efforts to date, interviewees called for efforts to identify how AA could be further integrated within existing systems. For example, there was interest in how it might align with the humanitarian response planning cycle in the future, or how it could fit withing Ethiopia's drought working group.



Conclusion

The anticipatory action pilot in Ethiopia **demonstrates OCHA's skill and persistence in bringing clusters and humanitarian actors together** to design and roll out an innovative and large-scale pilot, despite very challenging circumstances and short timeframes.

Through **effective support and coordination, partners see the promise of cross-sectoral AA for drought**, and are identifying key hurdles to overcome, to make it as effective as possible in a context such as Ethiopia.

The **design challenges represent those that occur with new and innovative initiatives**, particularly when the **impetus to deliver within short timeframes leads to significant polarities to manage.**



Thank you!

