



ISSUE BRIEF

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ANTICIPATORY ACTION IN SOMALIA

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Key messages

- Anticipating weather-related shocks is not as simple as predicting rainfall, then looking at the agricultural seasonal calendar. People in many parts of Somalia have been faced with several overlapping shocks, with interconnected impacts.
- Livelihoods are also frequently diversified, often combining activities across rural and urban settings. However, the early warning systems used to trigger anticipatory actions (see below) tend to look at particular hazards, usually related to agriculture, and rely on a very narrow set of parameters. This mismatch makes it hard to use them to trigger the right support at the right time.
- Difficulties begin long before the *humanitarian* calendar allows for anticipatory action. Other channels for development resources are needed to support livelihoods to deal with crises, especially because livelihoods are dynamic and so support must help people as they constantly adapt.



About this paper

This brief is the first part of a series highlighting learnings that are emerging from a longitudinal study on anticipatory action in Somalia. SPARC is open to suggestions from a range of collaborators about how best to use any learning being generated in this process. For more information, or to explore opportunities for collaboration, contact Simon Levine (s.levine@odi.org.uk) or Lena Weingärtner (l.weingartner@odi.org.uk) or Alex Humphrey (ahumphrey@mercy Corps.org). It follows a previous evidence brief on the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of the same panel of respondents (see: [One More of Life's Difficulties](#)).

1. Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, more attention has been paid in the humanitarian sector to the possibility of giving assistance based on the *expectation* that a crisis is coming, but before humanitarian needs are severe. Under various labels – including anticipatory action, early warning or early response, forecast-based action and livelihood protection – interest is being pushed by organisations such as the Start Network, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, and UN agencies.

We prefer to use the term 'anticipatory action' because people facing possible crises anticipate and act. The discussion within the aid sector is better if it is not exclusively inward-looking, about the aid, but can instead focus on what everyone – affected farmers, pastoralists, businesses, local and central government, service providers and aid actors – could do with sensible anticipation and forward planning.

So far, only a limited number of anticipatory-action aid responses have been used. A few shocks have presented a need for specific mitigating interventions (e.g. information campaigns before heatwaves, protecting against landslides before heavy rains, or ensuring that tolerant seeds are available before predicted poor rains). Beyond this, and particularly in the livelihood domain, most anticipatory-action projects have made early cash transfers to allow recipients to choose their own anticipatory actions, without necessarily knowing what people might use or need money for at different times during a crisis.¹

However acting *earlier* is not necessarily the same as acting on time. The timetable for supporting livelihoods, for example, depends on the livelihood calendar and when different options are available or make sense; and the livelihood calendar is not directly connected to the humanitarian calendar of worsening need, where actions could be before a crisis, but still too late (e.g. cash might be distributed after herders could have used it to transport their animals, or seeds might be made available after planting time has passed). Action could also be too early to be useful (e.g. support for livestock marketing before herders are ready to think about selling animals).²

A great deal is written about coping strategies in different places, but very little documents exactly *when* people want to use different strategies or what their constraints are at different times. It may be that a more detailed understanding of crisis calendars in different places will enable support to be timed far more effectively, and that it will also open up more possibilities for assisting people to cope. It's not yet clear how important it will be to move towards a locally tailored use of anticipatory action, rather than the much broader use of blunt instruments (most commonly cash transfers). However, now that the case in principle for anticipatory action has largely been accepted, developing greater knowledge of different options for supporting people – and the most effective time for using them – is the next stage in its coming of age.

1.1 SPARC's investigation of anticipatory action

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) is a five-year research project funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). SPARC has already established a panel of households for regular interviews in Somalia, including Somaliland and Puntland. Because there were forecasts of poor first rains in 2021 in parts of the Horn of Africa, following on from poor second rains in 2020, the risk of a drought crisis was heightened. This opened a window of opportunity for a real-time learning exercise that could be useful for the future design of anticipatory action. By following farmers, pastoralists and traders throughout the rainy season and beyond, we aim to answer the following questions:

¹ See www.anticipation-hub.org for an emerging library on anticipatory action and for a database of anticipatory action projects undertaken by the international humanitarian sector.

² For a deeper discussion on the use of crisis calendars and windows of opportunity for taking anticipatory action, see [Levine et al. \(2020\)](#).

1. As shocks approach and as crises develop, what do (different) people know – about the future risk, its potential impacts and possible mitigating strategies?
2. What are their objectives at different times, given what they know (or what they think they know)?
3. What would they like to be able to do to avoid or mitigate the predicted problems?
4. What are their constraints to taking action? How and when could these constraints be removed?

Interviewing was conducted in February 2021 in five Districts: Burao (Togdheer Region, Somaliland), Galkayo (Mudug Region, Puntland), Jowhar and Balcad (Middle Shebelle Region, South West State) and Afmadow (Lower Juba Region, Jubaland). A total of 58 people were interviewed (42 men and 16 women³) in semi-structured, open-ended conversations in which they described how the current situation was affecting their livelihoods; how they were expecting conditions to develop; and what they were trying to do about it. Interviewees included crop farmers, agro-pastoralists, pastoralists and traders. These were the same interviewees who had been interviewed in September 2020 for a learning exercise about the impacts of Covid-19 on livelihoods.⁴ These interviews constituted the first round of conversations for this learning exercise on anticipatory action.

2. Livelihood difficulties among interviewees in February 2021

At the end of February 2021, no definitive shock had struck, and there was no sense of crisis. However, levels of anxiety were heightened and people were feeling a combination of several stress factors or small shocks to their household economies. These varied to some degree across the three locations, although a more in-depth analysis of regional differences will be developed only after further rounds of interviewing.

2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic

When we had previously interviewed our informants in September 2020, Covid-19 was perceived as a somewhat distant health threat. Awareness of its dangers was high, but no one knew of anyone who had experienced it directly; however, Covid-19 was already causing serious economic shock and social problems because of strict

public health measures being enforced. Remittances and income from urban casual work were down, and schools had been closed.⁵ Markets had been closed and trade was disrupted, causing some food prices to rise while the value of livestock that herders were selling had fallen, partly as a result of the cancellation of the 2020 Hajj, which is normally a huge export market. The impact of the cancellation of the Hajj was mitigated by favourable March–June (*Gu*) rains and good conditions for pasture and water in the rangelands.⁶

By February 2021, when informants were interviewed for a second time, the disease had spread and was present in these communities. Fears of Covid-19 had grown much worse and fear, rather than official restrictions, had increased the economic impacts of Covid-19. For example, many were afraid of catching Covid-19 through touching fruit and vegetables, which badly hit local horticulture markets.

2.2 Remittance flows

Remittance flows to sub-Saharan Africa had been expected to be hit by Covid-19, but data collected by the World Bank showed that, across sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, remittances actually increased by over 10% and in 2020, official remittances to Somalia rose by 18%. However, this may not reflect the actual situation because not all money flows are official or reported. Some believe that the increases in official remittances were due to improvements in reporting, and that this masked reductions in informal flows. Our interviewees reported that remittance flows were already reduced in September 2020, and that this situation had continued into 2021. This was keenly felt, not just because it curtailed ongoing consumption, but because it limited the capital available to take mitigating measures against other problems being faced, in particular the increasingly dry conditions (see below).

2.3 Locusts

There had been significant attacks of locusts across the region for several months, particularly affecting Somaliland and Puntland. Their threat to crops is obvious and well-studied,⁷ but they also had an impact on off-farm income. People were desperately trying to scare locusts away from their fields, and some who had been working in town felt that they had to return home to help in the effort to protect their crops.

³ It was initially possible to recruit only an all-male interview team, who found it hard to recruit and interview an equal number of female interviewees. There has now been enough time to add women to the interviewing team, which will help to improve the gender balance among our interviewees.

⁴ See [Levine et al. \(2021\)](#).

⁵ For further details, see [Levine et al. \(2021\)](#).

⁶ See [SPARC \(2020\)](#).

⁷ See, for example, [FSNWG \(2021\)](#).

2.4 Weather

The different interview sites were suffering from different weather-related problems. In rural areas near Afmadow in the Lower Juba region, as well as Galkayo in Mudug and in the Togdheer region of Somaliland, problems were mainly related to drought. Water was already scarce and many were having to buy it, particularly in the Mudug region near Galkayo. It was already proving difficult to organise commercial water trucking in some places because of a lack of transport. Many had to migrate with their animals to borderlands with Ethiopia and Kenya in search of water and grazing. Milk production was already seriously reduced in Burao and Galkayo, and some animal mortality was being reported. (Goat and sheep milk production would normally be expected to pass its peak by the end of January in much of Somalia.) The livestock market was already stressed, with both prices and volumes traded low.

Along the Shebelle River near Jowhar and Balcad, farmers were faced with floods that destroyed fields. Because river floods can be caused by heavy rainfall in Ethiopia rather than locally, people can be hit by floods and drought at the same time.

2.5 Animal health

Diseases of goats and of camels were reported, particularly among interviewees in the Mudug region, although we cannot independently make any diagnoses.⁸ Exacerbated by trade disruptions related to the pandemic, livestock keepers regularly complained about the lack of quality veterinary drugs on the market or the lack of timely veterinary services from community-based animal health workers.⁹

2.6 Politics

There were some fears expressed about insecurity. In Middle Shebelle there were some reports of disturbances from al-Shabaab, and some interviewees were worried about potential political instability related to uncertainty following the delay of the elections from August 2020.

3. Responding to livelihood threats

3.1 Weather forecasting and anticipation

In order to identify possibilities for supporting people facing an oncoming crisis, it is important to understand how they plan ahead, and how they use different sources of information to make their decisions.

Only a small number of interviewees mentioned hearing or using any formal weather forecasts as a basis for how they saw the coming season. Their sources included Radio Hargeisa, Somali TV, the BBC and one interviewee mentioned using the internet. When asked directly about the seasonal forecasting systems they used, most talked about knowledge systems that cannot easily be integrated with scientific meteorological forecasting, e.g. signs from the stars. (This is common among farmers across the world, and in the Western world most notably with biodynamic farming, which combines mainstream technical knowledge about soil fertility with a belief in cosmic and terrestrial forces, linking the phases of the moon and the alignment of the stars with the optimal timing of agricultural activities.) Many went further and expressed fatalism in the ability of people to predict what weather God would send. For short-range forecasts (i.e. looking forward just a few days), they used signs related to the prevailing weather (temperature, winds), or changes in vegetation caused by the weather.

There are a number of reasons for believing that interviewees may have been overstating their reliance on traditional forecasting strategies as a basis for actual decision-making. People's attitudes towards Covid-19 were clearly recognisable as 'scientific', and their trust in their god to protect them from Covid-19 did not lessen their keenness for information about the spread of the disease and current knowledge about its transmission, in order to know their own risks, nor did it affect their adherence to precautionary measures to reduce transmission. Almost everyone was well-informed about international developments and vaccines, from sources such as the BBC.

As in most of the world, indigenous beliefs do not replace scientific rationality but are incorporated into it (as with the case of biodynamic farming or with those who believe in astrology). We think that it is probably significant that interviewees spoke of their traditional systems generically and how they forecast in general, but did not give any examples of specific decisions they made that were based solely on whether or not on a particular date a certain star (*dirir*) was observed close to the moon.¹⁰ Specific examples of decision-making were always related to formal forecasts or to observations of the prevailing weather, e.g. that when a particular wind blows, "it is a good sign that rain is coming and people need to shelter the weak animals from the coming cold".¹¹

⁸ FSNAU/FEWSNET (2021) confirms deaths among small ruminants and ascribes them to insufficient feed and water, and 'drought-induced disease'.

⁹ A study in a similar timeframe also found that livestock keepers rated difficulties in accessing veterinary care as their most serious challenge – see FAO (2021a).

¹⁰ An example of forecasting given by one of the interviewees in Galkayo.

¹¹ From a different interviewee in Galkayo.

If labour-intensive and critical preparations to protect weak animals at the end of a dry season were based on observations of the weather and not on observations of, for example, the stars, this suggests that the role of weather forecasting techniques needs more careful exploration. Interviewees in Middle Shebelle predicted local flooding from information they obtained about rainfall in Ethiopia, and they had a good grasp of the time it would take for heavy rain elsewhere to cause local flooding downstream.

3.2 Reacting to stresses and shocks

At the end of February 2021, there was a very limited range of actions that people were taking in the face of a possible drought. Further, people were talking about trying to cope with prevailing problems, including climate-related ones, rather than preparing for a severe crisis some months ahead.

There are several possible explanations for such a limited set of reactions. Interviewees may have felt that the situation was not yet severe enough to warrant any extraordinary measures, given that their normal livelihood pattern is, itself, an adaptation to regular droughts; and given that the seasonal forecast for poor rains in March–June 2021 (which precipitated this study) were coming from international forecasting and were not shared by regional forecasting.¹²

Their limited range of responses, even to the existing situation, may be further explained by the combination of shocks (e.g. difficulties in finding work in urban areas because of Covid-19, locusts and loss of remittances), which limited their normal coping mechanisms to poor rains, and possibly also because there were simply not many options available, particularly for those who depend on crop farming. This will be explored more as the season progresses.

Herd management

Herd management is a continuous exercise in adaptation. It is hard to distinguish decisions made by livestock keepers in reaction to stresses that they already feel from those that could be labelled as anticipatory actions, taken in reaction to their anticipation of a more serious situation. The distinction may not even always make sense. While migration is a normal seasonal practice, the migration that was already under way in Afmadow (Lower Juba), Galkayo (Mudug) and Burao (Somaliland) was more extreme than normal, with most animals taken far from home, often to the Somali borderlands with Kenya, Somali regions of Ethiopia, and to the Sahil region of Somaliland. Pastoralists who usually move with their herds on foot, in

search of relatively nearby grazing land, instead described having to pay transporters to truck livestock especially long distances this year in search of pasture and water. This resulted in them being separated from their herds for long periods of time. Some respondents referenced this distance as a cause of hardship not only because of the additional costs involved for transport, but also because they depend on the ability to slaughter animals occasionally for food and income.

Several livestock keepers were already seeking to stock up with fodder and were having to buy water. In Burao and Galkayo, there were reports of people trying to prevent female animals from becoming pregnant (which would make them more vulnerable to drought) either by separating males and females into separate herds, or even by castrating males in their herds, presumably a fairly drastic step.¹³

Rangeland management

Several livestock keepers expressed interest in using rangeland management as a guard against droughts in principle, but did not see any way to achieve this in practice because of the communal nature of rangeland ownership and the difficulty for their own institutions in managing dry-season grazing reserves. In some cases, this led to a desire to individualise ownership of the rangeland. There was more interest in investing in fodder production for the future.

Local community action

There were several examples of collective action taking place in the face of likely threats. Communities had set up informal 'early warning systems' for locusts, warning each other by mobile phone when locusts were arriving so people could rush to the fields to scare them away. In Middle Shebelle, residents were working together to shore up riverbanks against floods. In some places, they had also contributed together to create community funds in preparation for floods. It was not clear whether these were funds to be used for taking collective preventive action or were a form of insurance for those who suffered losses. As the season unfolds, we will explore with interviewees their options for using such funds to protect livelihoods.

3.3 Adaptation

It is useful to distinguish *coping* behaviour, which is a temporary response to a livelihood shock or stress, from *adaptation*, which is a longer-term change to livelihoods to make them less exposed or more resistant to threats that are permanent or frequent. Interviewees talked much more about changes for adaptation than about the limited

¹² Compare, for example, the [FAO \(2021b\)](#) or [NECJOGHA \(2021\)](#) with the [Met Office \(2021\)](#) forecast of drier-than-average conditions for the same period.

¹³ This surprised us, and we need to investigate more about how livestock keepers will manage future breeding.

range of coping mechanisms mentioned above. Many of the adaptations were talked about as future plans. We will need to investigate further with them to see how genuine these plans are (i.e. feasible, practical and likely to be implemented) or whether they are more like wish-lists of practices believed to be helpful but which, for a variety of reasons, may not be practicable.

The combination of shocks was clearly making it harder to adapt to each individual shock. For example, in several cases, people explained that they had been unable to make the investments that they had wanted to make because they didn't have enough money – the remittances on which they had relied, or the income from casual urban work or from livestock sales, had been reduced by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some saw the urban economy as the best possible future – either planning to move to town themselves or planning something in the longer term, which involved sending one or more children to town to be educated as a future economic support for the rest of the family. People spoke of wanting to diversify income sources, but beyond generally looking for casual, unskilled work in towns, concrete examples were few. We need to explore further to see which diversifications are likely, particularly given people's limited investment capital, or whether this is simply a hope that they will be supported with some 'income-generating activity'. One interviewee had sold his animals and invested in a lorry, and was successful in using it to help pastoralists to transport their animals to find water and pasture. Others were also interested in such a change of livelihood.

Some interviewees believed that investments in crop farming could deliver a more resilient livelihood, talking about either expanding the areas they cropped or diversifying the range of crops they grew – the latter mentioned specifically in relation to reducing crop vulnerability to locusts. Others wanted to invest in protecting their herds, with several speaking of investing in water storage and, as mentioned above, in fodder production.

4. Our learning so far

4.1 Learning how to learn

Our shared learning journey has thrown up several challenges around the learning process itself, and we have mentioned above some areas for exploring further with our informants. As aid actors, we all have to learn about general and even abstract ideas, such as how people think about the future and how they make plans; and like all aid actors, we struggle to find specific questions from

which we can draw out general lessons, such as using information about people's specific triggers for particular reported decisions to learn about their attitudes towards the future and preparedness. A distinction has to be made between how – culturally – people talk about the future (e.g. using a language of fatalism) and the practical ways in which they make day-to-day decisions – which have future consequences. We also need to find clearer questions to understand the precise timings of activities, in a context where timing is always relative to the season and not the calendar date. Perhaps most importantly for us as aid actors, we want to identify where people could be helped to advance their own anticipatory actions. Recognising that we are talking to people familiar with the game of using aid agencies' interviews to influence aid spending, we have to learn whether people are talking about practical plans, about a plan that is just out of reach, or about what is simply an ideal wish that they hope an aid agency could make real. These learning challenges are ones that we share with government ministries and their civil servants, operational agencies and donors.

4.2 Age and gender

One might expect that people's perception of the future and their ways of reacting to it would be very different across generations and also between men and women. It is striking, though, how rarely studies of coping distinguish between the reactions and plans of young adults and those of the middle-aged or older generations. Our interviewing so far has not allowed us to make any serious analysis of either gender differences or age differences in people's knowledge and attitudes to the future, their preferred plans or their constraints. This is a serious gap in our developing understanding. It was initially possible to recruit only an all-male interview team, who found it hard to recruit and interview an equal number of female participants. There has now been enough time to add women to the interviewing team, which will help to improve the gender balance among our informants. The panel for October 2021 will be expanded to ensure adequate numbers of men and women, and of different age groups and conversations will focus particularly on exploring whether or not there are any such patterns.

4.3 Living with multiple shocks

It is much harder to identify anticipatory actions for particular shocks when talking about livelihoods that are regularly hit by multiple and overlapping shocks. It is harder to link current conditions (e.g. rainfall or market prices) to the likelihood of people being able to cope, or not, in the coming weeks and months. For example, the 2021 farming season for some was delayed by locusts, which also increasing their exposure to risk of crop failure from poor rains. Problems were then exacerbated because they lacked the capital to take mitigating measures against drought because income had been lost because of the effects of Covid-19.

How well can a hazard-focused early-warning system (or anticipatory action protocol) combine such disparate shocks in setting triggers for action, or to determine the most appropriate way of helping? SPARC's analysis of the likely impact on livelihoods of the first Hajj cancellation¹⁴ was that it would be unlikely to be catastrophic for pastoralists, partly because favourable pasture conditions mitigated the impact on livestock sales. A second cancellation in 2021, at a time of weather stress, may be very different. However, such predictions would require a level of detail in livelihood analysis that goes beyond the use of simple 'objective' parameters, which seem to be the favoured approach to early warning in many agencies involved in anticipatory action or early response.

4.4 Humanitarian aid and anticipatory action

In our judgement, it is an extremely positive development that anticipatory action is firmly now on the humanitarian agenda in Somalia, with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) among those planning interventions. However, our interviews are already suggesting that there may be limits to the role that humanitarians can play in heading off livelihood crises before they arise.

The different kinds of livelihood stress and coping strategies discussed above were all happening by the end of February 2021. This was long before the situation could be considered a crisis and before it was even clear if a crisis would develop (which would depend largely on the nature of the first Gu rains in 2021).¹⁵

At that stage, humanitarian agencies had still not fully planned what anticipatory actions they would take in response to a potential worsening of the situation if the 2021 Gu rains were poor. However, in some places, pastoralists had already left the area with all of their livestock. While investing in anticipatory actions in March or April for a potentially very serious crisis later in the year is important, it is also important to find other mechanisms for supporting livelihoods much earlier, even if a full crisis never develops. Such action is beyond the reach – and even of the mandate or mission – of humanitarian agencies because the livelihood-support calendar and the humanitarian calendar are simply too different.

In Somalia, the people themselves were looking at what they needed to do mainly in ways that aid agencies would classify as 'disaster risk reduction' (DRR) or as developmental. Some of it was the kind of physical infrastructure (e.g. riverbank reinforcement) that is regarded as typical of DRR, but there was also 'soft' DRR in the creation of local social networks for warning about

locust attacks, and a perceived need for other soft DRR in having institutions of rangeland management that could enable the protection of dry-season reserves. Our first round of interviewing also brought out the desire of some interviewees for long-term transformation of their rural economy, such as greater investment in fodder production, creation of water storage or diversification into locust-resistant crops.

This does not imply that humanitarian anticipatory action will not also have an important role to play; that will become clearer in later interviewing rounds, if and when the food-security situation becomes severe.

Acronyms

BBC	British Broadcasting Company
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FEWSNET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FSNAU	Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit – Somalia
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
SPARC	Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted
UN	United Nations
UN-OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

¹⁴ SPARC (2020).

¹⁵ It appears that the Gu rainy season in 2021 has been poor, but did not entirely fail. We will be monitoring the situation in future interview rounds to see how far this has affected people's food and nutritional security, and their ability to cope.

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