MALAWI ANTICIPATORY ACTION:
PROCESS LEARNING ON TRIGGER DEVELOPMENT

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28 October 2005 African women selling vegetables and potatoes on a dusty roadside in the township of Liwonde in Malawi, Southern Africa on a hot day
Image: Mick Harper, Shutterstock

Climate change and drought land
Image: Piyaset, Shutterstock

● BACKGROUND

Building on growing evidence that acting prior to the onset of predictable shocks is significantly faster, more dignified, and more (cost) effective than traditional humanitarian response, OCHA has been facilitating the setup of multiple anticipatory action frameworks. In 2020, OCHA and partners initially commenced work facilitating the development of five collective anticipatory action pilots: Bangladesh (monsoon floods), Ethiopia (drought), Malawi (dry spells/floods), Somalia (drought),

and preliminary work in Chad. In 2021, these efforts were scaled up to include six more pilots, including: Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Nepal, Niger, the Philippines and South Sudan. A multi-country cholera pilot was also added in 2021. Collective anticipatory action (AA) is still an innovative space. Thus, in addition to the frameworks, each OCHA-supported pilot also invests in documenting evidence and learning, focused on process learning, agency specific M&E, and independent evaluations.

● INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, following close to a year of design and development, the dry-spell framework for anticipatory action in Malawi was endorsed by the Resident Coordinator and pre-approved by the Emergency Relief Coordinator for the 2021/2022 season. The objective of the framework is to mitigate the impact of dry-spell events on vulnerable, at-risk individuals and communities in Malawi, through collective, cross-sectoral anticipatory action. This pilot was selected by OCHA to address a new type of shock and to explore the use of AA in what is considered to be a development context, but with high rates of poverty and vulnerability. For example, in 2019, CERF had allocated over $10 million USD to Malawi for a rapid response to drought. Malawi has suffered from periodic climate-based shocks with devastating impact on highly vulnerable households.[1] Additionally, dry spells and floods were identified by the Resident Coordinator as priority shocks to address. Initially, the team had intended to develop a dual shock framework, however the flood component was ultimately dropped in late 2021, when it became clear that the predictive capability for floods in Malawi was not yet sufficiently robust. The pilot focuses on three districts in the country's southern region, namely: Balaka, Chikwawa and Nsanje. These three districts were chosen as they are characterised by relatively regular exposure to dry spells, as well as high vulnerability, making them a top priority for the Government of Malawi (as per the National Resilience Strategy) and the United Nations Country Team. Across the three districts, the pilot has the potential to reach over 185,000 households. The trigger model for the 2021/2022 season makes use of a hybrid trigger model, comprising a predictive (stage I) and an observational component (stage II). The two-stage trigger works as follows:

● **Stage I:** In mid-November or mid-December, if the predictive trigger is met for forecast dry-spell events in January or February respectively, dedicated funds are released for activities by the Protection and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sectors, prior to the predicted shock (implemented by UNICEF, IOM, and UNFPA).

● **Stage II:** Starting in January, if the observational trigger is met (meaning that a dry-spell event has occurred in at least three districts) in either January and/or February, then dedicated funds are released for the commencement of activities by the Food Security & Livelihoods (FSL) and Nutrition sectors (implemented by WFP, FAO and UNICEF). The activities which take place after the shock are specifically designed to mitigate medium-term/evolving impacts before they reach their respective peaks.

This report offers lessons on the process of developing the trigger for the Malawi AA Framework.[2] Process learning aims to capture lessons on how AA pilots are being designed and implemented in real time. This allows OCHA to document the benefits and challenges of developing AA frameworks, as well as learning on assumptions about the logic of AA. The learning cycle is intended to support the increasing quality of AA plans and (in the event a trigger is reached) effective implementation. In this case, the trigger has not been reached as of February 2022, limiting performance assessment.

Developing new AA frameworks requires managing ambiguity, balancing competing priorities, and navigating polarities within unique and complex environments, to arrive at workable triggers and implementation plans. There are no perfect solutions, and each new pilot requires assessing and managing risk and uncertainty, taking an iterative approach to framework development, and accepting trade-offs. A collective and collaborative process of arriving at an approach – embraced by key actors, and staying true to the spirit and intent of AA – can lead to unique results which depend on the country and context. As well as the technical solutions that arise from this approach, the process of developing and agreeing on a framework provides a rich opportunity for learning and iterative improvement.

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1 Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator Report on the use of CERF Funds - Malawi Rapid Response Drought 2019

2 For more information and guidance on trigger development, see *Being timely: creating good triggers and plans in disaster risk financing* (Felix Lung, Centre for Disaster Protection, 2020).

● METHODOLOGY

The lessons presented in this report are drawn from seven semi-structured interviews with selected people closely involved in the pilot development (from OCHA[3], the RCO, and partner UN agencies in-country[4]), as well as observations from participation in regular pilot team meetings. The selected interviewees were intended to provide an overview/representative perspective from stakeholder groups closely involved in trigger development. While relevant government agencies were informed of the pilot, their participation in its technical development was minimal, such that the roll-out team did not think they would be able to answer questions specific to the trigger. It's worth noting that, as seen in the analysis below, interviewees spoke about limited government engagement as a challenge and limitation. This suggests there would be value in specifically exploring this topic through follow-up learning conversations.

The focus of this process learning exercise was specifically on determining to what extent major assumptions that underpin the logic and process for developing a workable trigger held true. The assumptions tested are as follows:

● Selected triggers are deemed legitimate by partner organisations and relevant government agencies;

● Triggers have a clear causal relationship with the shock;

● The timing of the trigger aligns with the required windows of action; and

● Timely and accurate data on the selected shock is available in pilot countries to facilitate modelling.

The selected approach aimed to meet two objectives: a) collect qualitative information on key stakeholder perceptions about what is being learned in a focused way on each of these points, and b) to foster ongoing dialogue with the pilot roll-out team, AA partners and stakeholders on critical topics related to trigger development.

However, it's important to highlight that these qualitative findings cannot provide a technical 'yes/no/maybe' answer to whether these trigger-related assumptions hold true. Rather, they offer a window into the pilot roll-out team's learning on these points, and how they developed a 'good enough' trigger, that aligns with the intent of AA while managing the risks associated with practical and data limitations. For a more technical assessment of the Malawi AA trigger for dry spells, the UK Government Actuary's Department (GAD) conducted a quality assurance review, which is publicly available.[5]

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3   OCHA does not have an office in Malawi. Instead, the pilot was convened in-country by the Resident Coordinator's Office.

4   The full list of those interviewed: Maribeth Black (WFP), Luis Amaya Ortiz (FAO), Kash Hussain (RCO), Max Bonnel (RCO), Daniela Cuellar Vargas (OCHA - HFSA), Christoph Baade (OCHA - CERF), Josee Poirier (OCHA - CHD).

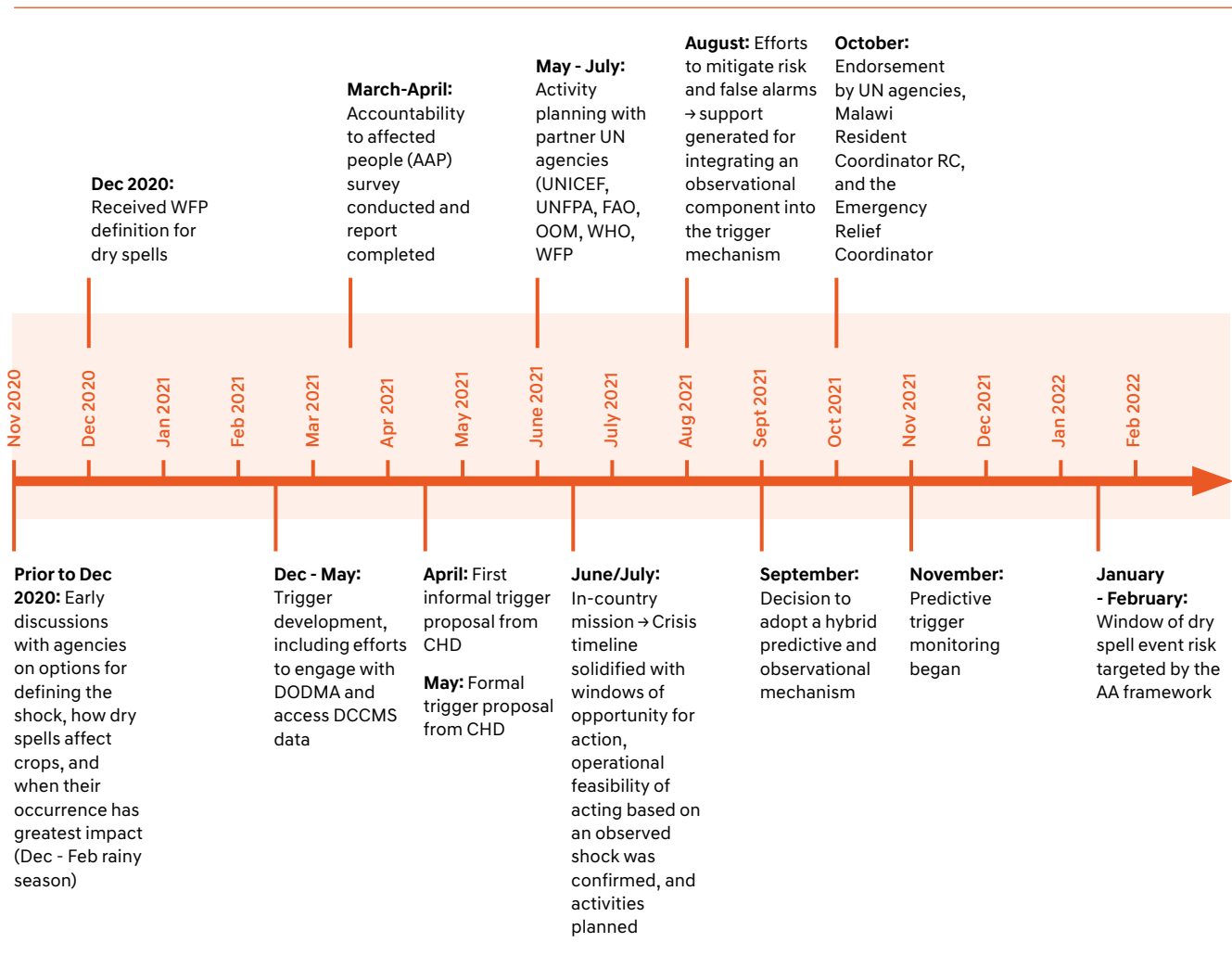5   INSERT CITATION AND LINK TO GAD REPORT ONCE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE

● TRIGGER DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The trigger development work was led by the Centre for Humanitarian Data's (CHD) predictive analytics team, with inputs from in-country stakeholders, scientific partners and OCHA headquarters. This was an exploratory pilot for OCHA, as no other AA frameworks in other countries targeted this same shock. Exploring innovative ways to anticipate dry spells is significant, as climate change is expected to lead to more erratic rainfall patterns, which may not constitute a drought but can still lead to major crop damage and food insecurity. This pilot offered important learning on how to respond to climatic trends, due to increase the frequency and intensity of such types of shocks.

Figure 1: Framework for strategic DRF

Trigger Development Process Timeline

March-April: Accountability to affected people (AAP) survey conducted and report completed

May - July: Activity planning with partner UN agencies (UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO, OOM, WHO, WFP

August: Efforts to mitigate risk and false alarms → support generated for integrating an observational component into the trigger mechanism

October: Endorsement by UN agencies, Malawi Resident Coordinator RC, and the Emergency Relief Coordinator

Dec 2020: Received WFP definition for dry spells

Nov 2020 | Dec 2020 | Jan 2021 | Feb 2021 | Mar 2021 | Apr 2021 | May 2021 | June 2021 | July 2021 | Aug 2021 | Sept 2021 | Oct 2021 | Nov 2021 | Dec 2021 | Jan 2022 | Feb 2022

Prior to Dec 2020: Early discussions with agencies on options for defining the shock, how dry spells affect crops, and when their occurrence has greatest impact (Dec - Feb rainy season)

Dec - May: Trigger development, including efforts to engage with DODMA and access DCCMS data

April: First informal trigger proposal from CHD

May: Formal trigger proposal from CHD

June/July: In-country mission → Crisis timeline solidified with windows of opportunity for action, operational feasibility of acting based on an observed shock was confirmed, and activities planned

September: Decision to adopt a hybrid predictive and observational mechanism

November: Predictive trigger monitoring began

January - February: Window of dry spell event risk targeted by the AA framework

Trigger development was a collaborative process, with the OCHA team and partners iteratively responding to and addressing challenges along the way, due to the nature of the shock and limited data. This included needing to agree on a definition for dry spells, not having publicly available forecasts for dry spells, and a lack of strong predictive signals for the shock's onset. These challenges are well documented within the AA Framework itself, along with the strategies used to overcome them.[6]

Early on, in-country staff from FAO and WFP (the designated leads for the AA pilot from each agency) provided significant inputs on how to define dry spells, and discussed with the roll-out team what would be needed in terms of timing and windows of action. CHD used the initial information to work on a model for the desired type of predictive trigger. There was not yet full clarity about the ideal windows for action, however. Additionally, due to a lack of historical data on the shock, CHD had to develop their own historical record, based on available climate data and the selected definition.[7] It was difficult to establish a strong forecast-based signal on the likely occurrence of dry spells. Following several months of development, and through ongoing conversations between OCHA HQ, CHD, the Resident Coordinator Office (RCO), and collaboration with climate scientists and other partners (who highlighted the challenges in predicting dry spells in the requested lead time), concerns persisted that the false-positive rates were too significant to provide a viable predictive trigger for the entire AA framework. Ultimately, through many conversations with the RCO and CERF colleagues, OCHA determined that it would not be possible to base the entire proposed funding envelope on a single predictive trigger.

The in-country mission in June/July 2021 represented a significant turning point in this process. OCHA had deeper conversations with UN partners (in particular, WFP and FAO) about the ideal timeframes for delivering activities by sector. This provided greater clarity on windows of action, and possibilities for mitigating risk. This was particularly important for the FSL and Nutrition sectors, in determining whether the dry-spells trigger could offer enough predictive capacity to allow for mitigative activities to be implemented before the planting season, or if activities should mitigate impact after the shock on crops had occurred, but prior to peak impact. These discussions led to greater clarity on feasible and impactful timing windows, and the creation of a two-tiered trigger.

The first predictive 'no-regrets' trigger, based on the original model, would release 20% of the 7 million USD allocated CERF funds in November or December, for forecast dry-spell events in January or February (respectively), for activities by the Protection and WASH sectors. The 'no regrets' activities identified by these sectors could be completed within the necessary timeframe offered by the predictive trigger. The second is an observational trigger, based on actual rainfall data monitored by CHD, signaling that a dry-spell event has occurred in at least three districts in either January and/or February. If met, this trigger would release 80% of the CERF funds for activities by the FSL and Nutrition sectors, intended to mitigate the longer-term impact of the shock. Each trigger is independent, with actions by the sectors relying on the respective trigger being met. Therefore, partial activation of the plan is possible, based on either trigger.

Interviewees spoke to a transparent and iterative process, where the AA roll-out team (including CHD, OCHA and RCO) came together in creative solutioning to develop this first AA pilot in Malawi. CHD was transparent about what would be possible given the data limitations, sharing updates along the way. They communicated the trade-offs of various approaches and worked with the roll-out team to identify the best options. Areas for potential future improvement were also noted – these included having a formal technical review of the trigger by agency partners, and having more consistent discussion between the agencies and CHD. Two of the in-country agency partners echoed the potential benefits of frequent engagement and updates on the trigger development, noting that it's possible to lose nuance in remote and two-tiered communication.

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6   For more detailed information on the challenges and how these were overcome, please see OCHA's Anticipatory Action Framework - Malawi Dry Spells, pages 6-8: https://reliefweb.int/report/malawi/anticipatory-action-framework-malawi-dry-spells-2021-2022

7   More details on the data used and analysis conducted by CHD can be found HERE.

Local African Fishermen in a wooden rowing boat fishing on Lake Malawi. This is essential, as it provides the local people with fish for their families and the community. Image: Paula French shutterstock

● DISCUSSION

Assumptions to test

1. Triggers are deemed legitimate by partner organisations, RCO, and relevant government agencies

OCHA, RCO and partners deemed the trigger legitimate.

Overall, interviewees agreed that the final trigger mechanism was deemed legitimate. They described how, with significant effort and collaboration, they had achieved a 'good enough' trigger for this first pilot year in Malawi, offering an opportunity to test and learn for further improvements. Some hoped for a more accurate trigger with more lead time. Building understanding about what is scientifically possible has taken time and explaining from CHD. Within the given constraints (data availability and timeframes to finalise the framework for the 2021/2022 season), they achieved a unified and agreed-upon approach.

More time is needed to build government understanding and buy-in for the trigger.

Consistent efforts on the part of the RCO to engage government agencies in the AA pilot led to some progress and awareness. Significant hurdles limited greater engagement, including the Department of Disaster Management Affairs' (DODMA) primary focus on mitigating covid-19, and significant turnover across key roles within the department during the framework development process. Ultimately, the government was presented with the final trigger proposal. However, it appears that significantly more effort and time would be needed to build greater awareness and buy-in on the trigger component, allowing the government to significantly contribute to the development process. Stronger government involvement would support access to local data and – just as importantly – draw on their expertise. Current government engagement efforts include the RCO working toward inclusion of the AA framework and trigger mechanism in DODMA's contingency plan.

Building a common understanding of 'good enough' aligns expectations

One of the lessons identified by interviewees was to collectively define what 'good enough' means, during the iterative and creative solutioning process. This should be

informed by a balance of qualitative and quantitative factors (such as a basis risk assessment) associated with the trigger, as well as overall project objectives. This would allow the group to continuously align expectations, while embracing a learning mindset for future improvement and iterating. Ultimately, in this case, 'good enough' meant agreeing how to mitigate risks associated with high false-alarm rates, while enabling learning possible from developing an effective AA plan for a new shock type and trigger.

Consistent communication supports transparency and buy-in

Due to the non-linear and emergent process by which a new AA framework is developed, it can be challenging to manage expectations and communication. This is particularly true when there are multi-tiered communication channels, and when trade-offs must be collectively navigated. Some interviewees felt more frequent updates with all partner agencies about work on the trigger would have been useful, as there were periods with less communication on the trigger development process. Several factors were named, including technical roadblocks, uncertainty about the way forward, and challenges in reaching partner agencies and getting their feedback in a timely fashion. Generally, engagement and buy-in is supported by sharing the technical challenges, non-linear decision-making, time, expertise, and trade-offs that go into developing the trigger.

2. Triggers have a clear causal relationship to the shock

It's important to highlight that the findings presented below are based on interviewee assessments of the extent to which this assumption held true, according to their understanding of the shock and trigger. However, more objective evidence must be gathered and documented over time. This assumption will be critical to revisit in the light of learning that occurs as the trigger is tested and its performance assessed, relative to humanitarian need.

Dry spells can lead to crop failure and humanitarian impact, though more evidence will be needed to refine the trigger in the future.

Based on prior climatic events in Malawi, dry spells at certain times of the growing season can lead to significant crop failure. This said, interviewees had differing perspectives on the extent to which a causal relationship has been established with this specific trigger. On one hand, there is understanding that extremely low/no rainfall during critical periods of the growing season will have serious consequences on crops, negatively impacting

farming households. In a highly food-insecure and socioeconomically fragile country, the resulting shock and humanitarian need is highly probable. Affected people from target districts were surveyed, and spoke to their understanding of a dry spell and when they take action to mitigate its impacts (all measures described responded to damage to crops, harvest, and livelihoods). On the other hand, various complex factors need to be better understood, such as whether high temperatures and evapotranspiration rates should be accounted for in defining what constitutes a dry spell with serious humanitarian consequences. There is little historical data tying the selected definition to humanitarian impact, though it was found to be generally consistent with what was reported by surveyed households.

In this case, the causal relationship was difficult to establish; this is due to the unique nature of the shock and the fact that only recently have OCHA and other actors begun addressing it, with limited evidence to draw from. Thus, the hypothesis needs to be documented with more evidence, adapting the trigger to adequately capture the right timing and disaster threshold level. For this reason, much will be learned from this initial trigger.

The definition of the risk matters, and it must first and foremost be anchored in the reality of how and when human needs arise from the shock being addressed.

Part of the challenge identified above is that the impact of a dry spell on households may vary, based on factors beyond the amount of rainfall. The timing of the dry spell (i.e., during critical times of the agricultural season, such as following planting or during flowering) and the temperature are significant additional factors. Stakeholders agreed on starting with a pre-established definition based on extreme lack of precipitation (less than 2 millimeters, cumulative) over at least 14 consecutive days. However, the definition is not explicitly based on factors that constitute a humanitarian shock, and it was found to have limitations. The definition was too granular to link with global climate forecasts, leading to a weak predictive signal for the onset of a dry-spell event. It took time to find other options, which ultimately included developing a hybrid trigger mechanism with an observational component. The definition was chosen prior to results from the household survey conducted by OCHA on experiences of communities affected by dry spells. While the definition was not inconsistent with findings, this data may have informed the trigger-design team's understanding of the shock.[8] A future iteration of the trigger may revisit options for the definition.

8   Link to survey report once available

3. The timing of the trigger aligns with the required windows of action

Partners came to agreement on the selected windows of action, and how the trigger aligned with these.

Interviewees generally agreed that the timing of the triggers aligns with the required windows of action for each sector. This took time to develop and validate, given the trade-offs made for certain sectors between trigger lead time, accuracy and timing for implementation. For example, the provision of drought-resistant seeds would require significant lead time and readiness activities, but for which it was not possible to develop a sufficiently reliable trigger. There is consensus that the current trigger is now ready for testing. Over time, as humanitarian impact pathways of dry spells are better understood and documented, and through evaluating the results and timing of actions based on the current trigger, decisions can be more data-driven.

Observational triggers can still be anticipatory in nature.

With recognition that the initial predictive trigger had high false-positive rates, the pilot team shifted the approach to include a complementary observational trigger that would apply to the FSL and Nutrition sectors. This came with recognition that anticipation can mean both anticipating the shock itself and anticipating the progressive increase in humanitarian need related to the shock. Ultimately, what's most important is for the trigger to respond to the desired mitigative activity and moment of funding need. In this case, the predictive and observational components are related, and both help ensure alignment to the ideal windows of action identified for the various sectors. This addressed programmatic considerations for partners in the FSL and Nutrition sectors (FAO and WFP) on the timing of activities, as well as reduced financial risk exposure for CERF, in relation to limited predictive capacity of the initial trigger.

The in-country mission was instrumental for the roll-out team and partners to collaboratively work on integrating all parts of the framework.

The team found great value in working in-depth with stakeholders, to bring together all the pieces of the framework under development in the best way. The team worked closely for an extended time with agency partners, to build the crisis timeline and understand ideal windows of action. This allowed for developing clearer anticipatory windows and the creation of a link between ideal activities and their timing – to which the trigger could then be adapted. With the initial predictive trigger, partners from the Nutrition and FSL sectors found the window of action too short for the types of interventions they would recommend before the shock (for example, provision of drought-resistant seed). However, with the observational trigger, they determined that it would provide enough time for provision of cash transfers and other livelihood support activities to mitigate the shock. From CERF's perspective, it had been challenging to accept the risks associated with the fully predictive trigger in Malawi. With further analysis of the crisis timeline, the team landed on an apparent 'win-win' solution, in creating an observational trigger to minimise risk and use programmatic logic to catalyse actions after the dry spell, but prior to households experiencing the peak shock.

Developing the AA framework required working with agencies to ensure humanitarian logic and operational concerns drive timing and interventions.

As stewards of innovation around AA, OCHA aims to honour its conceptual logic to achieve maximum impact, while accounting for risk appetites and operational feasibility. The tension between establishing a framework that both makes sense within the logic of AA and one that is realistic and operational was compounded by the complexity of working on a new shock type, with limited empirical data on its humanitarian impact. In this complexity, other incentives (such as protecting existing government relationships and/or programmes from the risks that come with innovative projects) may influence partner decisions around timing and activity selection. The process requires negotiating these factors to achieve feasibility, while pushing for an analytical and data-driven approach. It also requires trusting in what agencies identify as being most impactful and feasible within time constraints, while continuing to investigate and encourage evidence-based interventions. The results of implemented activities need to be investigated as part of planned learning and evaluation exercises, once the mechanism triggers. The more empirical data underpins crisis timelines, the more AA timing can be based on a sound understanding of when humanitarian need increases, and the most impactful ways of intervening – thus better aligning the trigger and activities.

4. Timely and accurate data on the selected shock is available in pilot countries to facilitate modelling

Access to data represented a major challenge for the pilot.

Interviewees generally agreed that the assumption of access to timely and accurate data did not hold true. It was a challenge to access data in-country for developing the trigger. There are no publicly available forecasts for dry spells. Due to the turnover in the relevant government agencies (particularly DODMA, as the primary government interlocuter for AA), it was not possible to access more relevant data sets. There was consensus that CHD did a great job with the publicly available data they could access, and this data was very much strengthened by adding the observational component of the trigger.

Access to in-country climate and disaster response expertise and data would require stronger government engagement and partnership.

As noted above, some progress has been made in building government engagement, and there is hope that the team will have better access to government expertise and data sets in the future. For the sustainability and vision of AA, DODMA, DCCMS and the Malawi National Statistics Office will need to have a greater role in data analysis, refining the triggers, and ultimately taking ownership. Some questions remain about whether strong engagement with meteorological services in-country (where they exist) needs to be prioritised at the start of developing a framework. This engagement could be linked to existing capacity-building efforts in-country (led by other agencies and/or INGOs) to better understand the disaster and its humanitarian impact, and to use forecast data to mitigate future shocks. CHD could then advise on how to improve the framework over time.

It's important that data used to develop the trigger is public and accessible to all.

One of the necessities of using publicly available data to develop the trigger is that it provides a transparent and verifiably objective tool. Assuming access to data improves for in-country partners– through ongoing relationship building and sensitisation on AA with government agencies – there is a parallel need to advocate for making that data publicly available. Government data should also be consistently cross-referenced to other sources to make sure it is as representative as possible. This is critical for ensuring the perceived legitimacy of the trigger mechanism, so that everyone can see where the data comes from, how it feeds into the framework, how the trigger is derived from it, and how that translates into action on the ground in the event of a shock.

Understanding the data landscape - including access to and availability of relevant data - is important for early-stage decision-making and scoping of AA frameworks.

Multiple interviewees spoke to the importance of appropriately sequencing how the trigger development process unfolds in relation to the other components. One area of agreement was the need to understand early on what data is available, and what modeling could be possible for the trigger. This would allow the OCHA HQ AA team (the Humanitarian Financing Strategy and Analysis unit – HFSA, CHD and CERF) to make data-informed decisions about which shocks to address, and the risk appetite for development of a new framework in a given context. One interviewee advocated for the data landscape, predictive capacity, and types of possible triggers to be priority considerations in the selection of which new frameworks to develop. However, others highlighted the important contributions of CHD's trigger development work in generating new learning and approaches, despite the limitations of current data products, which are unable to predict small amounts of precipitation with great accuracy.

Overarching Benefits of Building the Framework

Interviewees highlighted co-benefits from the AA framework development, including establishing the link between the trigger mechanism and the selected activities.

An unprecedented effort allowed the team to build and test a new model, generating learning relevant to future efforts in Malawi and other initiatives.

The learning generated has been well-documented, and is already being processed and integrated into how OCHA goes about developing other AA frameworks. Lessons will continue to be gathered on the functioning of the trigger model and framework, benefitting the broader network of actors working to develop AA. Through support from the Centre for Disaster Protection, the UK GAD conducted a technical review of the trigger, providing a valuable third-party perspective and recommendations. The RCO described a positive experience in developing an innovative and unprecedented tool that has brought

OCHA, the RCO and in-country agencies together. There is a hope that the many lessons learned in the process will be useful for future efforts. In particular, the RCO is already looking at how the AA framework can be leveraged for work in Malawi on a shock responsive social protection system. There is also the intention to look at how it can fit into Africa Risk Capacity's (ARC) insurance work and the World Bank's Global Risk Financing Facility (GRiF).

AA forces partners to think more strategically about how best to respond.

UN agency partners described having to look differently at the timing of what can be done to mitigate humanitarian impact. The agencies had to push themselves to justify the decisions being made, going into great depth in analysing why, how, when and who they would target across sectors and interventions based on AA disbursements. This pushed the quality of the framework in terms of the rigour and analytical value of the exercise. It also led to a richer understanding of the benefits of AA at the country level.

The team had to be clear about limitations and let go of pre-conceived ideas.

The challenges in developing a predictive trigger for dry spells compelled the team to see the scientific limits of what is possible in addressing a new shock when the necessary data is unavailable. Being clear about limitations is a major learning and benefit, as it fosters humility and clear-sightedness in what it takes to develop a trigger for a new type of shock. This requires letting go of pre-judgements for how things 'should be', and not assuming that something will work because it has worked in other contexts, or for other shock types. It also enables the team to better develop risk management approaches.

Stronger relationships between OCHA and in-country UN agencies.

The process allowed the AA rollout team to build stronger relationships with UN agencies in-country. This was particularly true as Malawi does not have a standard Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) where the full extent of the humanitarian system is present, though the development process did leverage the Humanitarian Country Team. As such, there was not an embedded cluster system to rely on for those relationships. The team was able to create a collaborative dynamic and a new way of thinking about humanitarian aid.

Overarching Challenges of Building the Framework

Interviewees also expressed a couple over-arching challenges, with implied lessons for future process improvements.

Interaction between OCHA and in-country partners could benefit from more frequency and deep-dives, without diminishing the RCO's central coordination role.

When OCHA does not have a presence in-country, it is the RCO's mandate to govern the AA framework development process, streamlining communication and coordination for agencies. From the RCO perspective, this centralisation is designed to protect in-country staff from being over-burdened by the project. Without diminishing the importance of this governance and coordination mechanism, some interviewees advocated for more direct and frequent communication with OCHA in the future. There were some points during trigger development where agency headquarters interfaced directly with the CHD team. Having the technical insights and inputs from technical agency colleagues who previously worked to develop definitions and triggers was extremely valuable. However, at the country level, this communication was limited. There was general consensus among interviewees that greater technical engagement earlier in the process may also have been beneficial.

Balancing the principles of AA and pragmatic constraints takes patience and creativity.

The roll-out team must manage the polarity between holding true to the conceptual logic and principles of AA (i.e., focus on developing a predictive 'no-regrets' trigger to launch mitigating activities before the shock occurs), and responding to the real constraints of data availability and the operational windows communicated by partners. Early in the pilot, a focus on the principles of AA made it difficult to pivot to a more pragmatic approach (though one which some may have disagreed with) that used an observational trigger, and gave agencies in the FSL and Nutrition sectors more lead time for implementing. This is a tricky balance to strike, and one AA roll-out teams must navigate in every pilot, setting expectations about taking such an approach.

Boy carrying small fish in his hand at the beach in Cape Maclear, Malawi. Image: Dietmar Temps, shutterstock

● CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To the extent possible in an emergent and non-linear process, the AA roll-out team should generate alignment and consistent communication around sequencing.

Each pilot faces unique circumstances and elements that make it difficult, if not impossible, to outline a standard, linear, step-by-step approach to building an AA framework. For example, in Malawi, the RCO requested starting with the analytical trigger work, while bringing on the capacity needed to convene stakeholders around the AA strategy and programme. Additional complications (created by both covid-19, and government personnel changes due to suspected misuse of public funds) added significant factors to navigating how and when it was possible to progress on each framework component. The nature of the process is context-specific, inter-dependent and iterative. Nonetheless, alignment within the OCHA HQ team on anticipated sequencing for each component of the framework, to the extent possible prior to communicating with in-country partners, may help to clarify and set expectations. Additionally, communicating early and frequently about the non-linear nature of the process – while also giving some sense of sequencing – can help prepare partners for managing the ambiguity. In the case of Malawi, there were differing views on how to best sequence trigger development with intervention development. One interviewee called for triggers to be developed first, to have fewer modifications mid-stream. However, others advocated for (and promising practice suggests) developing the trigger concurrently with identifying the best mitigative activities and their ideal timeframes. Another interviewee advocated for first confirming the availability of sufficient data on the shock and its impacts, and then starting with an in-country mission to develop a strong crisis timeline with technical programme colleagues, before completing further work on the trigger. Gathering a basic understanding of the data landscape makes sense, as long as the articulation of desired mitigative activities and their timing remain the foundation for the exercise. These can then give rise to in-depth technical work around data assessment and trigger development.

The technical definition of the trigger needs to follow from the desired response to the shock and humanitarian outcome.

The trigger serves as a tool that must meet specific needs. In-country partners need to clearly identify those needs, in terms of humanitarian impact pathways and associated mitigative activities. Along with perspectives gathered from communities and people facing disaster risk, this identification process informs the trigger development.

It allows for early analysis of what activities should be started when, based on the anticipated impacts of the shock. The more clearly these activity, timing and funding needs can be stated, the better the trigger can be developed to meet them. Data used to define the trigger (whether predictive or observational) ultimately needs to reflect a common understanding of the desired response and outcome, serving to signal the release of funds during the window for action. It would serve OCHA AA roll-out teams to build a foundational alignment with in-country partners around what those ideal (and feasible) responses are, along with the funding need and action timeframe.

Continue building alignment with stakeholders on what 'anticipatory' means.

There are differing perspectives on whether acting after the shock but before peak impact constitutes AA. This question is complicated by the fact that not all shocks and their impacts have a clear 'before' and 'after', particularly for slow-onset hazards. This question represented a discovery process for the roll-out team, as they were working with a new shock, determining what 'anticipatory' meant in the case of responding to dry spells. While the mitigative timing of activities is at the core of AA logic, interpretations in practice vary. This requires establishing common parameters for what constitutes AA with partner agencies for a given shock and within a given context, even when there are differences of opinion. This also highlights the value of evidence-based information on impact pathways to inform AA activities, the trigger used, and windows for action.

Continue to strategically assess where existing trigger mechanisms exist that can be leveraged, and where to invest in developing new triggers.

The challenges with trigger development in Malawi highlight the importance of approaching new contexts and shocks in a strategic, systematic and data-driven way. The process of developing a new trigger for a new hazard requires significant research, and it includes many complexities and unknowns that take time to understand and account for. Innovation and creativity are needed to push the edge of what is possible to predict and mitigate more humanitarian crises. The development of new and time-tested triggers is essential to this innovation, calling for OCHA to explore partnerships with relevant entities and existing mechanisms. The experimental approach – which opens the door for innovation and partnership in shock selection, trigger development, and activity selection – allows roll-out teams to continue fostering important learning that will serve in the future.

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