

PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF EARLY ACTION

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A START NETWORK POSITION PAPER



INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) World Humanitarian Trends 2017¹, the number of disasters triggered by natural and human-induced hazards continues to rise, due to a combination of increased vulnerability and climate change. Vulnerability to disasters is highest in lower-income countries, particularly in fragile, conflict-affected states characterised by weak institutions and extreme poverty. The Overseas Development Institute's working paper² "*Disaster risk reduction in conflict contexts*" reports that 58% of deaths from natural disasters occur in the top 30 most fragile states.

Whilst media attention invariably focuses on large-scale disasters, UNDRR Global Assessment Report³ attributes the majority of disaster losses in lower-income countries to smaller scale, recurrent events (floods, storms, landslides). In September 2019, Ms Mitzutori, Head of UNDRR reported:



LARGE NUMBERS OF LOWER-IMPACT EVENTS THAT CAUSE DEATH, DISPLACEMENT AND SUFFERING ARE OCCURRING MUCH MORE FREQUENTLY THAT PREDICTED.



Although a major concern for at-risk households, losses due to smaller emergencies are *under the radar* of national government agencies, under-reported in official disaster databases, and invariably have to be managed by affected communities without national or international assistance. This is particularly the case in fragile states where national /local government capabilities are weak and/or dysfunctional.

¹World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2017

² Disaster Risk Reduction in Conflict Contexts ODI May 2019

³ Global Assessment Report 2015 UNDRR

As disasters increase, the growing number of people in need of humanitarian assistance is placing greater demands on available resources. The solution in part lies in a shift to a more anticipatory system⁴ that support at-risk people to act early before a predicted hazard turns into a disaster, thereby reducing losses and the need for external assistance.

In 2013, the Start Network established the Start Fund with a focus on medium and smaller-scale emergencies. In 2016, the Start Fund *Anticipation Window* was created to enable its members to respond early to emerging crisis. Between 2016-2019, the *Anticipation Window* allocated £3.7 million to implement 19 early action projects across Africa, Asia-Pacific and the Caribbean in response to a range of different hazards.

In January 2019, the Start Network commissioned an independent review of current forecasting and risk tools to inform the future implementation of Start Network anticipation work. Drawing on the findings of the review report⁵,

this working paper highlights critical issues and makes recommendations to put at-risk people at the centre of early action and build partnerships to drive a systemic shift towards an anticipatory humanitarian system.

KEY FINDINGS

Over the last decade there has been several donor-funded initiatives (e.g. WMO-Capacity Development; CREWS; CIRDA;) to strengthen global, regional and national forecast capabilities. These are primarily focused on improving government agencies ability to predict high impact hazards due to extreme weather. However, challenges remain in the ability to convert improvements in the quality of forecast information into local early action. In the words of a review respondent:



NATIONAL FORECASTS AND WARNINGS DON'T REACH, ARE TOO VAGUE AND UNRELIABLE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL TO MOTIVATE AT-RISK PEOPLE TO TAKE EARLY ACTION.



TIMELINESS: TIMELY EARLY ACTION REQUIRES RESPONSIVE LOCAL ACTORS

Early action, particularly for rapid onset events, is dependent on the speed of onset and the time required to complete activities. Short lead times (typically only a few days) can limit the scope of actions that can be implemented - sufficient time to save lives, but often too little to protect assets. Extending lead times can increase response options, but also increases the forecast uncertainty and the risk of acting in vain.

⁴ Report of the UN Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit 2016

⁵ Forecast Based Financing Tools Review Start Network July 2019

In recognition of these challenges, the Start Fund has a very fast activation cycle, although this must be matched with rapid response close to the point of implementation. Local actors and at-risk people are well positioned to mobilise and initiate timely early action. Empowering local actors through localisation can optimise the time available to plan and implement early action. This should include integrating an anticipatory approach into existing community-based early warning and preparedness planning programmes in high-risk areas. One review respondent said:



TIMELY EARLY ACTION REQUIRES LOCAL PREPAREDNESS PLANNING, NOT JUST



RELEVANCE: THE UTILITY OF NATIONAL FORECAST INFORMATION DEPENDS ON IT RELEVANCE TO LOCAL END-USERS

The last decade has seen a growing range of forecasting tools for different types of hazards. However, national forecast information was considered to be overly technical, with low spatial resolution data only appropriate for events affecting large geographical areas e.g. droughts; cyclones. More precise information is needed to inform action planning for smaller events, although extrapolation methodologies to increase data resolution can decrease forecast reliability. To better understand “official” forecast information, Start Network have developed a practical set of **technical guidance notes**⁶ for the prevalent hazards.

Start members expressed a strong preference for contextually-relevant risk information sourced by local partners and community-based groups, where possible validated by national forecasts. Importantly, to motivate local responders to act early, hazard forecasts need to be contextualised in term of potential losses. This requires understanding how hazards interact with vulnerabilities and exposure to predict likely impacts. Impact information can subsequently be used to determine appropriate early action to be taken in specific areas. This would necessitate the sector to develop and promote an “**impact-based forecasting**” approach.

RELIABILITY: FORECASTS MUST BE TRUSTED TO PROVIDE RESPONDERS WITH THE CONFIDENCE TO ACT EARLY

Although there have been major advancements in forecast methodologies, the risk of “*acting in vain*” based on unreliable information is a major disincentive to early action. The Start Network has developed several approaches to manage the trade-offs between forecast timeliness, relevance and reliability, including secondary data analysis / extrapolation and identifying “low regrets” actions. In general, there was a preference for using risk information based on real-time observations and local alerts. The combination of real-time local observations, where possible validated by national forecasts, can provide more reliable predictions of impacts on specific areas

⁶ Start Fund Pre-Alert Guidance Note

ACCESSIBILITY: NATIONAL FORECASTS OFTEN DO NOT REACH LOCAL END-USERS - “LAST MILE CHALLENGE”

National forecasts and associated warnings have no benefit unless communicated and utilised by private and public end-users. In Sri Lanka, an Oxfam survey found “*seventy five percent of at-risk households do not receive timely early warnings.*” Despite advancements in communications technology, there remains a critical gap between those who *observe and generate* hazard warnings and those who *receive and respond* to their impact – the “*last mile challenge*”.

PREPAREDNESS: TIMELY EARLY ACTION REQUIRES INVESTMENTS IN LOCAL PREPAREDNESS PLANNING

There was strong consensus that early action is most effective when people and organisations are prepared and ready to act. Although local actors and at-risk people are the first to respond to any crisis and well positioned to implement early actions, respondents reported that local actors are often unprepared, have limited response capabilities, are disconnected from external resource providers and remote from decision-making processes – the “*first mile challenge*”.

Forecast-based early action must be linked into existing community-based early warning, disaster preparedness and resilience activities. The localisation of processes can strengthen institutional and individual readiness to deliver timely and contextually-relevant early action.

POLITICAL COMMITMENT: THERE IS A NEED FOR STRONGER POLITICAL OWNERSHIP OF THE EARLY ACTION AGENDA

Although early action can reduce disaster losses and the need for external humanitarian assistance, stronger political commitment is required for a shift towards an anticipatory approach. Harnessing the agency of affected people is a critical resource for change that can reinforce policy advocacy for anticipatory action and a supportive enabling environment. Increasing local participation in early action decision-making processes can raise public awareness, increase accountability and build political commitment for fulfilment of government’s sovereign responsibilities for public safety and protection from predicted hazards.



AFFECTED PEOPLE HAVE A STRONG VESTED INTEREST IN ACTING EARLY, ALTHOUGH THERE IS ONLY LIMITED POLITICAL COMMITMENT FOR EARLY ACTION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

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RESOURCES: CURRENT FINANCING FOR EARLY ACTION REMAINS LIMITED, BUT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE

Limited resources were identified by review respondent as a constraint to taking early action to scale, although this does not automatically imply new funding. People's agency, self-help, volunteerism and reciprocity is a strategic resource for community-based early action that can be better harnessed through localisation and collaboration.

Moreover, existing disaster risk and development financial mechanisms could be utilised to mainstream forecast-based action, including: international humanitarian funds (UN - CERF); sovereign risk insurance mechanisms; national social protection schemes; climate change funds; disaster risk reduction and risk-informed development initiatives.

To leverage resources, build synergies and avoid parallel funding modalities, innovative partnerships and new financing arrangements are needed across humanitarian-development boundaries based on comparative advantages and collective outcomes. The Start Network, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, has produced several working papers exploring how disaster risk financing approaches could be used to increase the effectiveness of the humanitarian system, including an anticipatory approach. See Start Disaster Risk Financing discussion papers⁷.

CONCLUSIONS

Building an anticipatory humanitarian system requires an *end-to-end* system-wide approach that connects global/national forecast providers with local end-users. Over the last decade there has been a strong focus on *supply-side* investments by institutional donors to strengthen the capabilities of national agencies to generate forecasts and issue warnings. Similarly, the Start Network has supported approaches to improve the relevance of national forecast *information* for in-country members, although challenges remain in the timeliness, relevance, reliability and accessibility of national forecasts to inform local action planning - *the "last mile challenge"*.

⁷ Start Network: Impact Before Instruments Papers / Disaster Risk Financing in Concert Sept 2019

In this context, return on investments in enhanced forecast and warning services are only as good as the effectiveness of local response mechanisms; investments in one aspect of the system will reach a *point of diminishing returns* in relation to other elements. Top-down approaches to improve national forecasts and warning services need to be reinforced with bottom-up *demand-side* actions that recognise at-risk people have a vested interest in early action and harnesses the comparative advantage of local responders - the **“first mile approach”**.

The **localisation** of “impact-based” forecasting, based on the priorities, knowledge and capacities of at-risk people, together with the expertise of humanitarian actors, provides a way to build synergies between supply- and demand-side activities to the mutual benefit of both. The social process of engaging local actors and affected populations in the localisation of early action is as important as the dissemination of hazard forecasts.

Going forward, scaling up forecast-based early action will require a holistic approach across all stages of the disaster cycle, that integrates early action into both humanitarian and risk-informed resilience-based development programmes in hazard-prone areas. This will require new partnerships across different sectors, actors and administrative levels, supported by innovations in existing financing arrangements.

The Start Network, comprising of dual mandated agencies, with operational experience in early action, institutional capacities from local to global levels, expertise in disaster risk finance and access to independent funding, together with a strategic focus on *localisation, finance and innovation*, has a strong comparative advantage in localising early action and building innovative partnerships across traditional boundaries to support a systemic shift towards anticipatory action.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: ALL STAKEHOLDERS

- I. **Mainstreaming:** Integrate forecast-based action into relevant government and non-governmental development & humanitarian strategies and programmes, particularly community-based preparedness & readiness initiatives
- II. **Support FbA pilots** in different programme contexts and operating environments / countries
- III. **Facilitate exchange and dissemination** of relevant forecast /risk information between national service providers (e.g. NHMS / NDMA) and local State/ non-State end-users (last mile approach)
- IV. **Practice** (tools & approaches): Support the development of impact-based forecasting tools that fosters the co-creation and ownership of risk information by affected populations
- V. **Localisation:** Support the localising of an anticipatory approach that puts at-risk people and local responders at the centre of decision-making and implementation processes (first mile approach)
- VI. **Processes:** Adapt existing government, donor and non-governmental policies, processes and tools to integrate early action into relevant projects and programmes in hazard-prone areas
- VII. **Knowledge:** Support inter-agency learning events to distil information and share evidence base for different types of crisis at relevant regional and national knowledge platforms / events
- VIII. **Strengthen national / regional FbA working groups** (communities of practice) to develop and promote early action principles, core values, quality standards, practices and training resources
- IX. **Political Commitment:** Identify early action “champions” (thought /practice leaders) to advocate for FbA with leadership of different sectors and promote a supportive enabling environment
- X. **Partnerships:** Encourage national government forecast and warning agencies to establish multi-actor partnerships (including Start members, partners, local actors) for anticipatory approaches
- XI. **Resources:** Modification to existing humanitarian, development, climate and Disaster Risk Finance mechanisms to increase access to resources for mainstreaming early action interventions
- XII. **Provision of research grants and seed funding** to develop and pilot impact-based early action approaches in natural and human-induced disasters

ABOUT START NETWORK

Start Network is made up of more than 40 aid agencies across five continents, ranging from large international organisations to national NGOs. Together, our aim is to transform humanitarian action through innovation, fast funding, early action, and localisation.

We're tackling what we believe are the biggest systemic problems that the sector faces - problems including slow and reactive funding, centralised decision-making, and an aversion to change, means that people affected by crises around the world, do not receive the best help fast enough, and needless suffering results.

START NETWORK MEMBERS

**ACTED ACTION AGAINST HUNGER ACTIONAID ADESO AGE INTERNATIONAL ALIMA
ARDD-LEGAL AID CADENA CAFOD CARE CARITAS BANGLADESH CARITAS SRI LANKA
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES CHRISTIAN AID COMMUNITY WORLD SERVICE ASIA
CONCERN WORLDWIDE CORDAID DOCTORS OF THE WORLD DORCAS GOAL
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