

EVERYONE SAYS THEY WANT “LOCALIZATION” IN ANTICIPATORY ACTION – BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

A cartoon-infused summary of insights from the 4As research project on Anticipatory Action and Early Warning Systems



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BACKGROUND

Over the past two years, researchers across Africa, Asia and US universities have joined efforts and developed an Academic Alliance on Anticipatory Action (4A) aiming to understand the design and implementation of Anticipatory Action. Out of this, by observing many projects linking early warnings and early action from around the world, here are some of ways in which we have seen this happen:

The need for speed can *discourage* the localization of decision-making

Existing problems in the humanitarian world, such as exclusion of local actors, can become more pronounced because of the time pressure involved in designing and implementing anticipatory action.

Observing many projects linking early warnings and early action from around the world, here are some ways in which we have seen this happen:



1. COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS

Funding gets decided upon at headquarters level, with a plan to fast-track implementation.

However, people who are the ultimate “implementers” of the actions do not know the details of the funding and for what purpose it is intended to be used.

Localization in anticipatory action requires candor, courage, and creativity to confront and resolve the usual barriers resulting from siloed structures and compartmentalized approaches to how risk-related information is gestated, shared, and utilized.



2. HEADQUARTERS-DRIVEN ACTIONS

Given the need for speed, there have been instances when headquarters staff decide that they should be the ones executing actions when an early warning is received.

This is entirely contrary to the concept of local decision-making, but headquarters-level staff plan to move themselves and supplies around the country because they received a warning.

While this might be perceived as a speedy solution, it means that most of the warning time gets used in transporting headquarters people and supplies to the region forecasted to be hit by a disaster!



3. DECISION-MAKING HIERARCHIES

Paternalistic and colonial viewpoints can be starkly revealed when there is pressure to take action quickly. Some people might not feel confident to take action if they have worked in a hierarchical system that does not give them decision-making authority. Others may not have been formally or informally delegated with such authority and thus feel they risk ramifications if they take the very decisions that could lead to swifter project implementation.

Higher-ups may perceive a lack of decision-taking to be a lack of competency, and therefore a rationale for not delegating authority. Thus negative perceptions and cycles are perpetuated - while anticipatory action is slowed down.



4. TAKEOVER OF LOCAL DECISION-MAKING POWER

When headquarters-level oversight is brought to an area where the disaster is forecasted, there is a risk of micro-management and the restriction of decision-making power from the people working or living in the affected region. This may be seen as necessary to speed up decision-making, as more actions can be taken unilaterally and as there is no need to communicate with headquarters for confirmation. In such a case, ‘geographical localization’ may occur but not actually dispersed decision-making power across people or organizations – one of the key tenets of localization.



CONCLUSIONS

The world is investing in more and smarter early warning systems to confront changing climate risks. Early Action Protocols can be important documents with comprehensive plans for action, funding, and learning. Anticipatory Action holds promise to reduce disasters. When early warnings are accurate, resources are quickly allocated, and decisions are taken in collaboration with local communities and actors, Anticipatory Action can pay off. This has been evidenced in many case studies.

Nonetheless, practical implementation can be a battlefield of different interests, logistical challenges, and limited follow ups. As anticipatory action becomes more prominent, it is imperative that we understand and address the trade-offs between localization and other desirable attributes of early warning systems.

The Academic Alliance for Anticipatory Action (4As) is a consortium of researchers from seven universities working to increase the knowledge base on anticipatory action. 4As is led by Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University in the U.S., partnering with Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique, Makerere University in Uganda, University of Namibia, National University of Lesotho, and University of the Philippines.



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