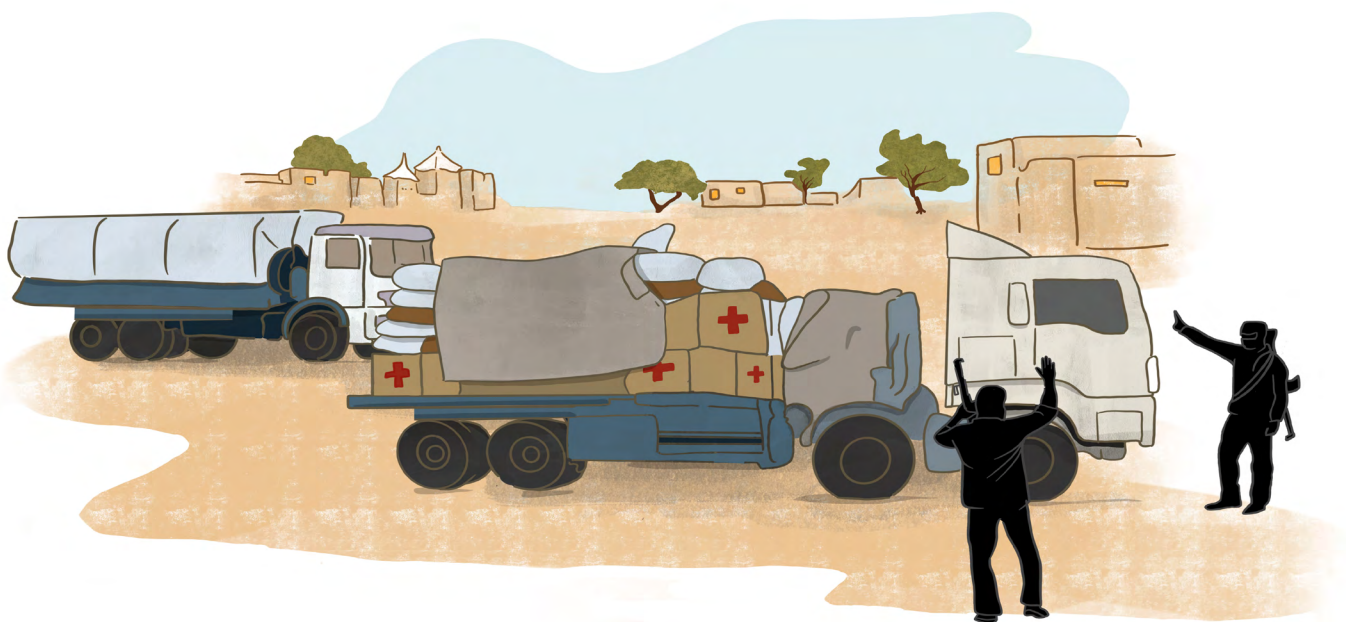


An Anticipatory Mindset

Security Risk Management and Communication Perspectives in Anticipatory Action to Enable Humanitarian Access during Conflict

This discussion note is for aid managers working in conflict-affected areas, either for anticipatory action (AA) or emergency response programmes. It proposes the use of an anticipatory mindset to strengthen programme interventions in insecure environments. It highlights opportunities for AA programmes to incorporate existing anticipatory approaches from aid security risk management into aid organisations' programme planning. It proposes the application of anticipatory thinking in the development of communication strategies that take into account sentiments expressed on social media. It also aims to strengthen conflict sensitivity and to propose practical tools to bring data from security and communication analysis into wider programming.



Executive summary

Anticipatory action (AA) is an approach that can help humanitarian agencies to deliver programmes and reach conflict-affected populations by enabling early action to deal with anticipated hazards before they occur. The anticipatory mindset is based on the underlying rationale of acting to avoid crises caused by foreseeable events. It focuses on the proactive analysis of potential issues that inhibit agencies' ability to implement an aid programme and achieve the desired effects.

An AA programme is a specific type of aid programming that acts ahead of predicted hazards or disasters to prevent or reduce their acute humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold. It aims to support the early identification of events that trigger specific aid responses to deal with shocks or crises that could occur at some future time. It is based on measurable forecasts and pre-agreed activities to support vulnerable communities in the window of opportunity between the trigger moment and the full impact of a shock. The response to the shock is usually financed through pre-arranged financing. Originally created to help deal with climate hazards, AA has been extended to include human-made hazards such as predicted election violence. There is also an increasing recognition that effective AA programmes have to be conflict-sensitive, and broad levels of conflict analysis have been included in some AA programmes.

This discussion note discusses the anticipatory mindset present in aid security risk management (SRM) processes and procedures, as well as opportunities for more anticipatory thinking in communication, community engagement, and accountability (CCEA) processes. It highlights SRM tools called standard operating procedures (SOPs) and contingency plans (CPs) used to determine the pre-agreed response activities. It discusses the data and information which informs the situation analysis that guides security-related decision-making. It highlights how social media sentiment analysis can be used to understand affected communities' perceptions of an aid response and to predict community attitudes towards proposed intervention measures in order to guide better communication measures that can be used to inform crisis-affected populations of hazards and response mechanisms, and possibilities for the provision of aid.

The discussion note concludes that untapped potential exists in AA programmes to better integrate key sources of information into aid programme activities. These sources include data and insights generated by the type of anticipatory thinking approaches used by the aid security-analysis community, as well as information gained from the analysis of aid-related sentiments expressed by target populations on social media platforms. Such context-related information is not usually generated through data models, but requires critical, creative, and strategic thinking in the interpretation of a wide range of data sources and perspectives.

The discussion note further emphasises that anticipatory thinking is essential for all humanitarian activities, and more of it is needed to improve responses in key sectors like health care, food security, and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) in conflict-affected environments. However, it is crucial to recognise that the goal is not to predict when and where violence will disrupt humanitarian efforts (as is done in AA applied to natural hazards like storms), but rather to focus on mitigating the consequences of human-made disruptions/disasters, minimising harm to civilians, and ensuring more effective aid programme delivery.

Introduction

Anticipatory action (AA) is an approach that can help humanitarian agencies to deliver programmes and reach conflict-affected populations by enabling early action in anticipation of hazards. The anticipatory mindset is based on the underlying rationale of acting to avoid crises caused by foreseeable events. It focuses on the proactive analysis of potential issues that inhibit aid organisations' ability to implement programmes and achieve the desired effects. A key benefit is AA's ability to enable humanitarian access in conflict-affected areas, which will be explored through security risk management (SRM) and communication with affected populations. This discussion note also sets out how the holistic anticipatory aspects of these workstreams can strengthen both AA and responsive humanitarian programmes.

The discussion note is intended to assist programme managers working in conflict-affected areas who wish to include an anticipatory mindset across the various humanitarian sectors to strengthen programme interventions in insecure environments. It does not aim to reinvent all possible ways of working, but rather to stress the use of proactivity and a detailed understanding of the context in which an organisation operates to mitigate risks to programme success.

The discussion note:

- proposes the framework of an anticipatory mindset as a perspective to strengthen proactivity in humanitarian sectors;
- highlights how such a mindset is already present in SRM processes, but is referred to with different terminology;
- recommends ways to further develop anticipatory thinking in SRM and communications with conflict-affected communities;
- discusses how SRM and appropriate communications are important aspects of effective AA programmes in conflict-affected areas; and
- stresses the possibilities of further developing this mindset to improve programme implementation, including specific AA and other types of humanitarian programmes.

It recommends that aid agencies should:

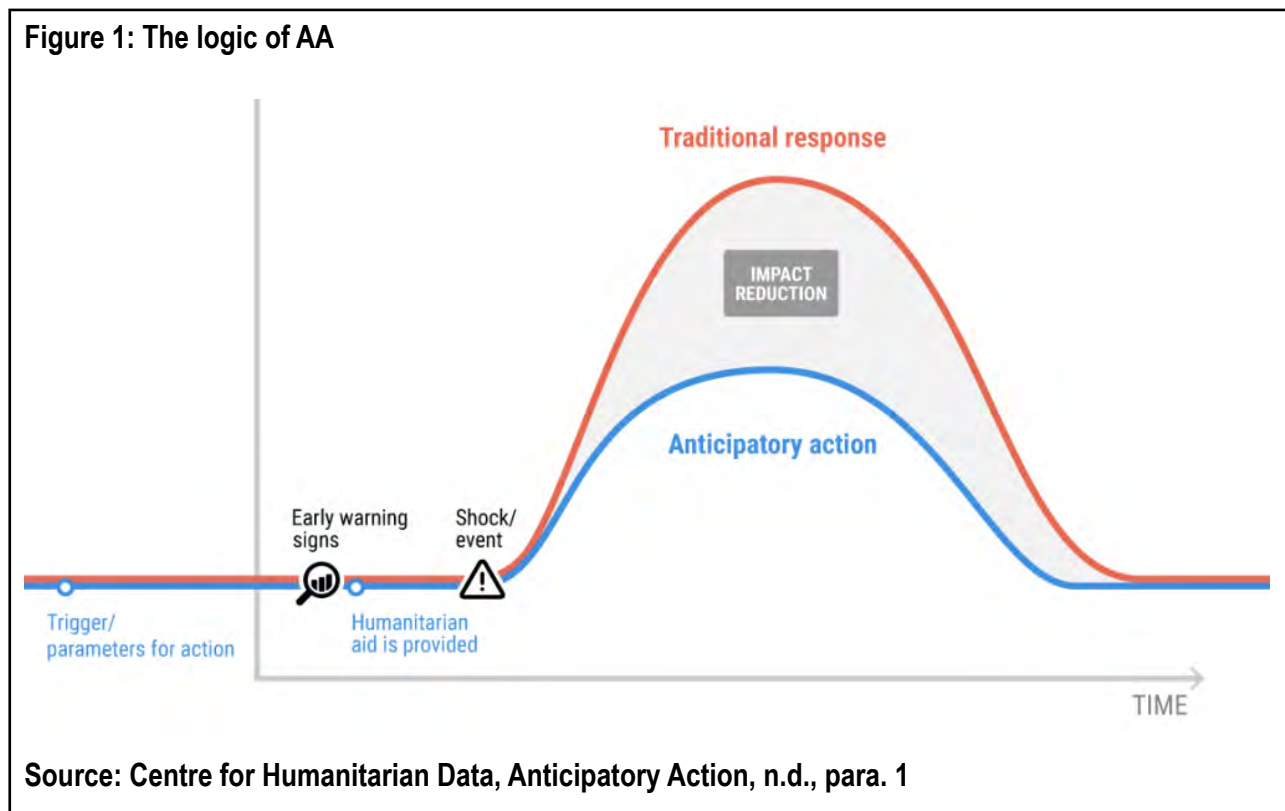
- extend the anticipatory mindset to support the SRM and communication sectors;
- extend the anticipatory mindset to key humanitarian sectors outside of specific AA programmes;
- utilise existing frameworks, such as SRM and its anticipatory mindset, in the wider humanitarian sector;
- base all anticipatory methods on extensive and detailed context and conflict analysis; and
- push for increased cooperation within and among humanitarian organisations.

The anticipatory action approach

Driven by the increasing occurrence of climate shocks and the effectiveness of early warnings in saving lives, the humanitarian system wants to be able to act before disasters occur rather than respond to crises that have already occurred. Anticipatory action (AA) supports this aim by providing humanitarian assistance before an anticipated hazardous event.¹ Although the AA approach was created to deal with climate disasters, the hazards that might threaten the beneficiaries of aid programmes include human actions that may cause loss of life, injury, or socio-economic disruption.² Several organisations have worked on extending the AA initiative to human-made hazards. For example, the START Network has acted in anticipation of electoral violence in Nigeria and Kenya.³ This is a crucial development, given that populations in areas affected by violence experience increased levels of vulnerability to a range of different hazards.⁴

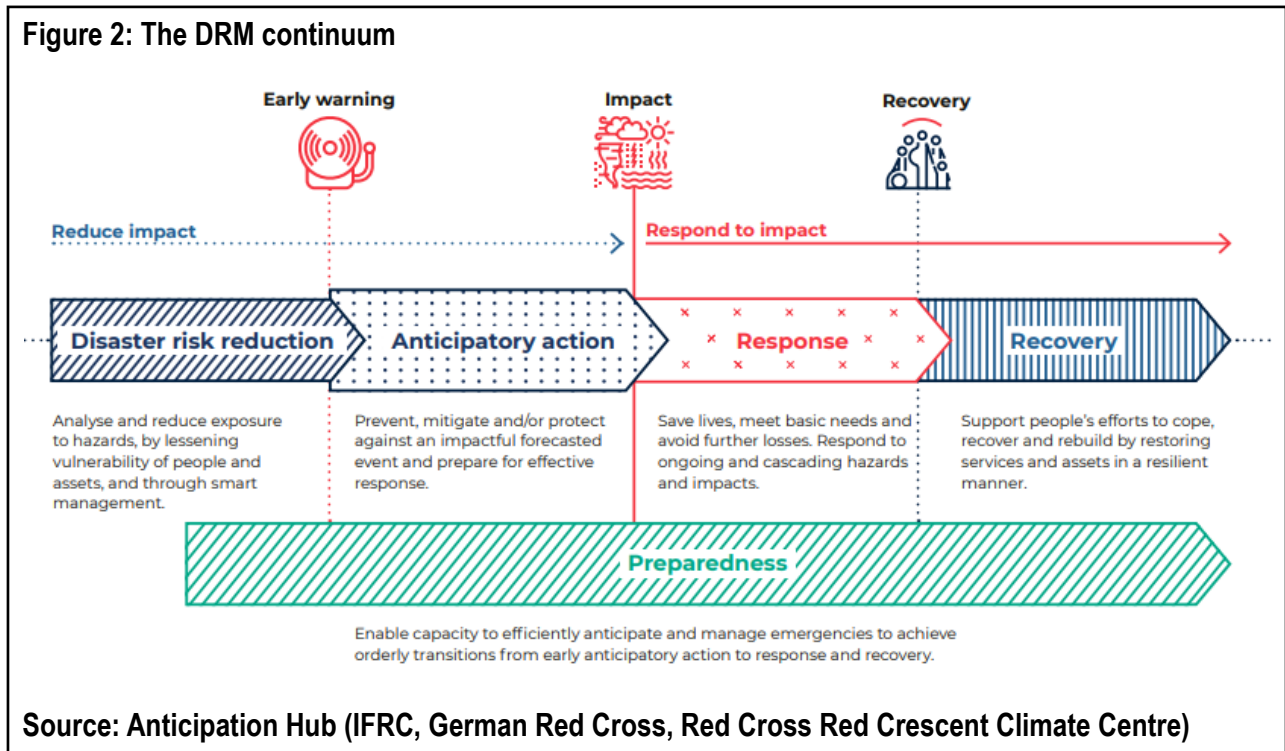
The proactive stance of AA involves pre-agreed financing and implementation plans, which are triggered when the specific predicted hazard occurs. By disseminating early warning messages, distributing shelter kits, facilitating evacuations, or providing cash support, AA aims to reduce the impact of such events before they fully unfold. It aims to save lives and mitigate other sources of harm caused by hazards while also, according to several studies, saving costs.⁵

AA thus anticipates hazardous events and is utilised before the delivery of emergency humanitarian responses. To place it into perspective and view AA as part of the wider continuum of disaster risk reduction (DRR), AA, response, and recovery, Figure 2 provides an overview of this continuum.⁶



An Anticipatory Mindset

As shown in Figure 2, AA occurs at the intersection between DRR and responsive humanitarian action. Whereas DRR focuses on ongoing disaster prevention measures and humanitarian responses after a disaster has occurred, AA deals with the short window between an early warning that a crisis might occur and the impact of such a crisis.⁷ Underlying this continuum is the shared goal of preparedness, which aims to build the knowledge and capacities of all actors involved, including communities, “to effectively anticipate, respond to, and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent or current hazard events or conditions”.⁸



AA programmes in conflict-affected areas

When considering how disasters can include human-made events, it becomes important to view how AA functions in conflict-affected areas. Two methods can be used to implement this. The first aims to reduce the impact of natural hazards in areas with high structural vulnerability due to continued violence. This is the most common approach, which usually uses long- and short-term weather and climate forecasts to activate (or trigger) the AA programme. The second method focuses on the forecasting of and proactive response to conflict itself and aims to mitigate its impact. However, at present models that predict conflict are scarce, difficult to use and unreliable.⁹

Predicting shifts in the intensity of violence is possible, but still suffers from factors that affect its accuracy and relevance. Power dynamics that are so important in understanding the increased vulnerability of the population in high-intensity conflict areas are difficult to objectively measure. Moreover, such developments tend to be highly local and often occur in hard-to-reach areas.¹⁰ All humanitarian work in conflict-affected areas requires flexible approaches to collecting relevant data that are different to what would be considered best practice in more stable areas. Predictive triggers in a conflict require qualitative human input, while acting early during a conflict requires conflict sensitivity. Several authors have raised ethical concerns about the prediction of conflict due to the possible influence of subjectivity and political motivation on the prediction process.¹¹

The anticipatory mindset

Due to difficulties in implementing standard AA procedures in conflict-affected areas, the application of the AA approach during conflict has been limited. Nevertheless, its development has shaped a broader rationale in humanitarian work that aims to avoid crises that result from foreseeable events, and this rationale can also be applied to conflict-affected areas.¹² This discussion note introduces the framework of the anticipatory mindset that has been influenced by this changing rationale and which seeks to address foreseeable consequences of conflict before they occur.

Preparedness vs anticipation

Preparedness aims to build institutional capacities to effectively anticipate and respond to hazardous conditions. In many ways, the idea of anticipation suggests a similar practice. But there is an important technical difference. Preparedness measures can be general and are not focused on a single and specific event that is expected to occur within a specific timeframe. When dealing with natural hazards, an example of the process is as follows:

In flood-prone areas, preparedness involves building dams and having general measures like sandbags and chlorine tablets ready. When an imminent flood threat is identified, anticipation comes into play by distributing these items specifically to the areas most likely to be affected and the population groups that were pre-identified as being the most vulnerable.

Thus, when dealing with natural hazards, **anticipation** focuses on specific, identified threats, enabling a proactive response to mitigate impacts before they fully unfold.

The anticipatory mindset requires a proactive analysis of potential, mainly human-made, hazards that can inhibit aid agencies' ability to implement a programme. Its applicability relies on:

- a detailed understanding of the context and all actors present in it, including their motives, in order to undertake coherent and relevant scenario planning;
- a willingness, the time, and the resources needed to analyse potential risks;
- cooperation across agencies and sectors to share and interpret data used to anticipate specific human actions and their potential consequences; and
- the ability to act on predicted changes at short notice.

An Anticipatory Mindset

The anticipatory mindset is a proactive approach that drives the creation of AA programmes. It aims to identify threats to the implementation of a programme and proactively reduce the impact of these threats by taking early action. Even when organisations do not implement programmes that are specifically called AA programmes, there are spaces for developing such a mindset. By investing time and resources in the anticipation of the consequences of other actors' actions, organisations can create standard operating plans to deal with these consequences, adjust their programmes accordingly, and work proactively. This type of thinking is also being developed in the wider policy sector. Although in many regards policy is generally viewed as reactive (i.e. it is formulated after a crisis has occurred in response to that crisis), many contemporary problems, including climate change, emerging diseases, and terrorism, require this anticipatory approach.¹³

This discussion note proposes similar thinking, highlighting some of the specific elements that apply particularly to working in conflict-affected areas. Discussions on this way of thinking can entail relevant learning and training for aid agencies. In the discussion note the topic will be discussed through a focus on security risk management (SRM), due to the need for strong safety and security protocols in areas affected by violence and conflict. The presence and application of the anticipatory mindset and future opportunities for its development will be addressed within the SRM process and its synergies with other sectors, specifically in efforts to communicate with disaster- and conflict-affected populations.

The arguments presented below show how an anticipatory mindset can be applied across an entire humanitarian system by integrating it into all sectors and types of humanitarian programming. While emphasising this mindset's broad use, each topic will also reference its current application in AA programmes to maintain a clear connection to more general SRM processes and procedures.



AA programmes, SRM and conflict sensitivity

SRM aims at enabling aid operations to take place in insecure contexts. Although SRM employs distinct terminology, it is essentially based on an anticipatory mindset. When humanitarian organisations implement AA or emergency response projects in volatile and conflict-affected areas, they must balance the need for access to affected populations with the need to ensure the safety of their staff and protect their essential assets. This balance requires context-specific SRM protocols.¹⁴ The goal of SRM is to enhance aid operations' access to crisis-affected populations while safeguarding aid workers and their programmes. Achieving this requires weighing the taking of acceptable risks against the life-saving potential of the programme in a procedure known as "programme criticality". This balance may shift over the course of a programme or intervention as conflicts and security environments evolve, necessitating continual ongoing adjustments.¹⁵ These challenging decisions are always informed by an assessment of the likely future issues that might arise as the situation develops.

SRM and AA programmes

Although natural hazard events often alter the security context, and both fields (SRM and AA) share a forward-thinking approach, best practices from aid-focused security are rarely addressed in AA literature or manuals. Frequently, a purely disaster-focused AA process ignores underlying tensions that are often triggered by the onset of a disaster. Shifts in insecurity and increasing risks are likely to occur during the activation phase of an AA programme. Crisis events result in greater risks to staff, and frequently restrictions on aid agencies' access to crisis-affected areas follow. Hazards also often trigger or aggravate underlying conflict tensions that may erupt during the emergency response. When designing AA programmes specifically for fragile settings, SRM processes should thus be at their core to limit the impact of crises on project implementation.¹⁶

Even more importantly, SRM should provide the basis for the preparation period for AA programmes. This preparation period includes the identification of hazards, the creation of triggers and the development of early action protocols. This process is called the build phase. Due to its development in relatively stable situations, this process stretches over a long period of time and can encourage in-depth security risk analysis and discussions with local partners, thereby strengthening the SRM process for local partners. It also allows for the highly important aspect of reviewing and adjusting security risk analyses in volatile or rapidly changing settings.¹⁷

SRM and the anticipatory mindset

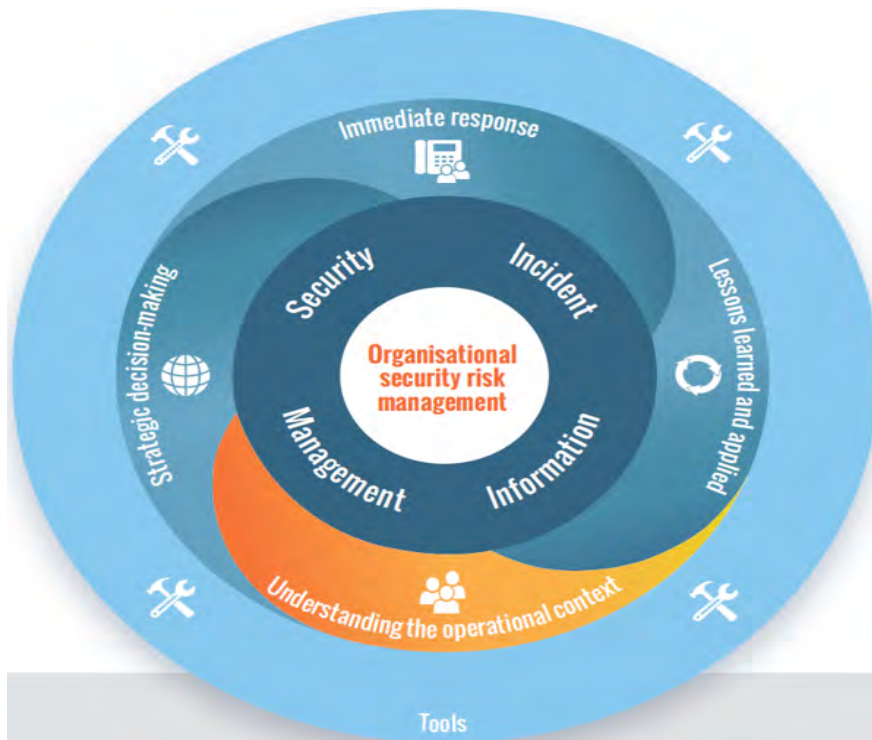
SRM as a sector displays the characteristics of an anticipatory mindset through its proactive methodology, analysis of risks, reliance on a detailed understanding of the context, and ability to continuously revise and update plans in volatile settings. It is therefore an excellent example of where to find information about the AA mindset and how to utilise it in practice to strengthen all types of humanitarian programming. It therefore provides the linking thread throughout the next sections of this discussion note while generating synergies with other sectors – which is an important characteristic of the anticipatory mindset that cannot be overlooked.

Data to reduce risks to programme implementation in conflict-affected contexts

Just as AA programmes are built around data, the situation analysis process that is used in SRM also uses data, information and analysis to create an in-depth understanding of the context. Data on patterns of violence offers valuable insights into the types of violent events that may threaten aid operations in various contexts. While the situation analysis process cannot precisely predict when violence will occur, it helps organisations to prepare for possible challenges by highlighting potential risks. Most importantly, it identifies scenarios that require mitigation plans to minimise the impact of events on aid efforts if such events happen again. For instance, in regions with a history of election-related violence, anticipating violence during future elections and election campaigns is an example of the application of the anticipatory mindset.

Security information incident management (SIIM) is the process of collecting and using information about safety- and security-related incidents that affect aid organisations to ensure staff safety and access to beneficiaries.

For more information: SIIM [EN](#), [FR](#), [ES](#), [AR](#). [Mobile guides](#) covering SIIM for staff and organisations



In many AA programmes and other contexts, anticipatory SRM remains an unexploited potential. This is particularly the case when programmes are implemented through local partners, because SRM partnerships between local/national and international humanitarian NGOs are often under-resourced and poorly managed.

Aid agencies have a legal duty of care to their staff, and training resources are disproportionately reserved for international staff, even though local partner organisations and staff tend to face greater security risks. The practice of transferring risk to an organisation that has limited capacity to manage it is also called “negative risk transfer”, and is often wrongly justified based on the assumption that local partners will automatically understand local risks and therefore need no further support. Aid agencies have a moral duty to consider the security of their partners when they are working with implementing partners.¹⁸ Yet many AA programmes do not build SRM practices into their programme design.

AA programmes rely heavily on data and often use forecast-based modelling systems to trigger early action protocols and procedures. However, conflict data is rarely precise enough for clear predictions of what exactly will happen and when exactly it will occur. Situational analysis requires data that is interpreted within its specific context, incorporating qualitative assessments informed by experience and knowledge. The best security analysts are diverse and lateral thinkers who can combine critical, creative, and strategic thinking. The systematic use and interpretation of conflict-related data could strengthen both programme effectiveness and staff security, but requires a more multidimensional use of data. The anticipatory approach used in SRM encourages organisations to continuously adapt their protocols in response to evolving threats. Effective engagement with local partners to mitigate and ethically share risks also requires long-term preparation. Anticipatory thinking identifies areas where proactive, long-term planning for hazardous human-made events can enhance an organisation's ability to maintain operations during a crisis. If integrated into an AA programme, SRM helps to negotiate security guarantees to ensure that aid programmes can continue to operate in crisis-affected contexts.¹⁹

Context- and conflict-sensitive analysis

Estimating the risks associated with an organisation's programmes and developing strategies to mitigate these risks require in-depth knowledge of the operating environment. This is crucial when operating in volatile and complex environments. An understanding of the **context** in which they operate enables organisations to adapt and respond in a locally appropriate way and is therefore central to working in a conflict-sensitive way. However, rather than focusing on minimising the risks that conflict poses to an organisation, **conflict sensitivity** focuses on *minimising the chances of an organisation negatively impacting conflict dynamics*.

Humanitarian programmes need to be considered and designed with the context of a specific conflict in mind. Aid agencies need to actively seek to limit the impact of conflict and potential escalations of that conflict on their programmes. The "do no harm" principle also requires aid agencies to consider how programmes may inadvertently contribute to conflict-related sentiments or grievances. When planning their work in volatile and fragile contexts and anticipating that significant hazards may arise, organisations need to be aware of the potential impact of conflict-related tensions. When this planning is not done properly, interventions risk having a severe negative impact on vulnerable, crisis-affected populations.²⁰

Conflict sensitivity therefore recognises that any type of assistance provided in conflict-affected areas will inevitably interact with the areas' peace and conflict dynamics and consequently risk aid agencies' humanitarian access to these areas being compromised or even denied. For instance, distributing assistance to some groups and not others may fuel tensions in the local society.²¹ Conflict analysis can enable organisations to identify the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace in a given context and analyse threats to programme success and opportunities that will increase the chances of success. In this way it maximises the protective impact of humanitarian assistance without contributing to abuse, neglect, exploitation, perpetuating discrimination, or exacerbating the situation's potential for violence.²² Yet it is still rare that insights from conflict-sensitivity analyses are transformed into formal and structured guidance similar to SOPs or CPs used by SRM experts.

AA programmes: Although conflict-sensitivity standards are quite commonly known, they are not always included when organisations are creating AA programmes. To take all of the context, conflict, and local elements into account requires not only the time to do so, but also the capacity to sustain the monitoring and analysis of these elements as an ongoing process. The “long build” phase of AA programmes should provide the time necessary to develop such an understanding of context and adjust the implementation protocols to the changing situation. If this is not done, organisations run a higher risk of not being able to implement their programmes in the short-term implementation window due to a loss of access or the development of other high-risk events that have not been planned for.

The anticipatory mindset thus stresses the need to understand how the actions of powerful parties to a conflict can affect the emergency response in fragile and conflict-affected areas. Even in cases where it is complicated to proactively act on information about risks to humanitarian access, an understanding of the situation can support the development of security protocols adapted to the specific context that avoid harm to staff and loss of assets.²³

SRM tools and methods

SRM uses SOPs and CPs as its main procedural tools to mitigate security risks.

The mitigation of risks presented by security-related incidents focuses on:

- reducing the probability that an incident that directly impacts aid agencies occurs (as outlined in SOPs); and
- minimising the impact of violence if an incident does occur (as detailed in CPs).²⁴

SOPs for SRM are developed by using an anticipatory mindset. They identify potential risks to staff and operations and outline strategies to mitigate these risks. They are applied when the risk level rises.²⁵

SOPs and CPs are usually built using three possible approaches that are often applied in tandem. These methods are:

- **Protection:** A preventive measure that reduces the risk of a threat occurring, for instance by building protective fences or employing security guards.
- **Deterrence:** A reactive strategy that relies on the use of a counter-threat, such as utilising armed protection or leveraging political pressure.
- **Acceptance:** A proactive approach focused on building the consent and cooperation of the involved communities, authorities, and other stakeholders. This strategy relies on negotiations and relationship-building as key tactics.²⁶

An Anticipatory Mindset

Of the three approaches, acceptance aligns most with the anticipatory mindset and conflict sensitivity. The strategy involves analysing which stakeholders are most able to create insecurity, how they may be able to enable humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas, and how organisations can cooperate with them. It includes humanitarian diplomacy through engaging in dialogue with state and non-state actors to strengthen acceptance and understanding of humanitarian programmes, as well as reminding them of their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Acceptance also occurs at a community-based level and can be supported by local partners with close ties to local communities. By using both measures, acceptance is an effective strategy for gaining access to an area and is thus essential. However, an important difference is that situation assessments to support an access strategy require strategic thinking based on a carefully considered use of data and information, and cannot rely on automated data models.

AA programmes: Creating access through acceptance is a very important consideration for AA programmes due to their short implementation phase. To effectively implement a project in the brief window of opportunity between the prediction of a hazard and its occurrence, access and security must be in place beforehand, and other potential risks should be anticipated.²⁷

The mindset that has been long established in SRM is a good example of how anticipatory processes can be present in sectors that support the implementation of humanitarian programmes. On the one hand, it shows the usefulness of SRM for AA programmes in conflict-affected areas, while on the other hand, it demonstrates how anticipatory mindsets have long existed outside of AA programmes. There are many opportunities to extend this mindset and create new strategies focused on the further identification of possible threats to staff or humanitarian access and on their proactive mitigation.²⁸



AA programmes and communication and community engagement

Good relations with local actors and a general acceptance of an organisation's work among stakeholders and communities need to be built over time. While active acceptance strategies are mainly used by larger organisations – due to their need for significant long-term investments and donor funding – there are ways in which smaller and less well-resourced organisations can explore communication methods that anticipate possible concerns. Communication encompasses a wide range of methods, including public relations activities focused on sharing information with the public or specific groups (such as donors). In the age of social media, communications with affected populations are best seen from the outset as a two-way dialogue rather than just a one-way campaign to provide communities with information.

Communications with local communities support the understanding of the context in which aid programmes operate. Aid agency communication processes that articulate agencies' priorities and preoccupations have to be conflict- and context-sensitive to avoid misunderstandings. This is particularly important for all communications via social media platforms. To achieve this, community engagement uses a two-way dialogue between crisis-affected communities and humanitarian organisations.²⁹ Such two-way communication strategies fall under the umbrella of communication, community engagement, and accountability (CCEA) and aim to support efforts to make an aid programme relevant to target communities, avoid aggravating conflicts, and support aid access.³⁰ When done well, community engagement makes humanitarian programmes more relevant to target communities, and therefore more effective and efficient. It stresses the need for conflict-sensitive programme delivery and requires the programme to be adapted to various vulnerabilities and capacities present in the local context.³¹ By involving local actors in these decision-making processes, humanitarian organisations build trust and acceptance among local communities. The inclusion of plans for effective two-way communication in the design and implementation of humanitarian programmes can thus also be regarded as part of a comprehensive risk management approach that facilitates humanitarian access to conflict-affected communities.³²

AA programmes and CCEA

When directly linking CCEA to the AA cycle, the aim is to use AA to assess the risk of disasters occurring, set up an early warning system, and identify relevant actions. In doing so, the ability to engage communities relies on the clarity of the communication system and the messages it communicates and is relevant both in the build and activation phases of AA. During the latter, communications with communities are used to provide life-saving knowledge in the form of early warning messages.³³ Such messages are also used in disaster risk reduction (DRR) programmes to alert the population to an upcoming hazard. It is essential that these messages effectively reach the target population, and this is largely influenced by the organisation spreading the message, the language used in any communication, and trust in the information provided among target communities.³⁴ An organisation can significantly affect whether communication messages successfully achieve their aims, but again this requires a significant knowledge of the context in which the organisation is operating, including conflict relations, culture, and factors such as "risk literacy". This latter term refers to the ability of someone to understand and evaluate the risk posed by an upcoming hazard, and is an excellent example of a process that can be understood and influenced through sufficient effective community engagement.³⁵

General preparedness measures taken in humanitarian programmes can include the development of multiple aspects of communication. There are opportunities to include proactive communication elements in the preparedness phase, and this requires articulating their role using an anticipatory mindset. Like SRM, the proactive approach in CCEA can focus on identifying relevant risks to the programme's success such as misinformation or disinformation. A proactive communication strategy may influence an online discussion and may mitigate the risks of widespread misinformation or disinformation, which poses a serious risk in volatile or conflict-affected areas. For instance, agencies can work in communities to establish trusted sources of information and help the population navigate the available information sources. This can reduce the likelihood of misinformation or disinformation affecting community members and increase their self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved without interaction between communication and SRM specialists in an organisation or the wider collective response of agencies working in the same context. The accurate targeting of communication strategies requires an in-depth understanding of conflict and power balances in the operating context, and this targeting process could be improved by using strong analytical SRM processes. Ultimately, these synergies can strengthen programme success by improving humanitarian access and reducing the incidence of targeted violence.

Analysis of community sentiment appearing on social media platforms

There are opportunities to utilise community engagement in the representation and understanding of risk. Social media in particular has become a key element in the communication ecosystem where community engagement and traditional public relations efforts interact with spontaneous community reactions and strategically targeted misinformation or disinformation. Communication can be one of the tools used to design acceptance-focused strategies. Although only useful in areas where internet and social media access is usually available, social media sentiment analysis and community engagement provide an interesting and out-of-the-box option for community engagement as part of an anticipatory process.

The strategy of gaining the acceptance of the target community largely relies on the extent of the community's trust in the organisation, which in part is influenced by its reputation. A poor reputation undermines programmes by reducing access and collaboration through a lack of support from the community, partner organisations, and other stakeholders. Reputation risk management should be an integral part of long-term trust building.³⁶ Public confidence in an organisation's values enables effective communication with local communities during emergencies and strengthens resilience that can mitigate reputational risk caused by geopolitical tensions or misinformation and disinformation.

Because negative perceptions about one aid agency are often transferred to the whole aid sector, anticipatory reputation management needs to go beyond the reputation of a single agency and include perceptions of foreign aid and contested values more broadly. Monitoring and understanding sentiment towards external support and how this influences perceptions about aid agencies' intentions is essential for a communication strategy that uses an anticipatory mindset to effectively counter unspecific allegations that erode trust. Equally important are strong internal policies that define how aid workers are expected to behave to ensure that no actions – whether on the ground or online – undermine trust in both an organisation's and the aid sector's core values.³⁷

Sentiment analysis on social media platforms in the aftermath of natural hazards

Natural hazards cause high levels of stress that is often expressed through emotional posts on social media. In many contexts, the dominant sentiments of how well a natural hazard response was organised are commonly informed by images and stories circulating on social media. Any conclusions that social media users draw are frequently based on short and poorly justified statements that reach millions of people via social media in real time. By the time the detailed official evaluation is published, social media conversations have usually moved on to other issues. The reputations of natural hazard response programmes are built by or lost in the public sentiments expressed in the immediate aftermath of the occurrence of natural hazards. Added risks are the politicisation of the technical aspects of a disaster response, which is particularly likely during election periods or other moments of political tension.

Flooding following Storm Daniel, Libya, 2023

Social media sentiment analysis of affected communities' perceptions of initial aid efforts in eastern Libya after the storm in September 2023 highlighted people's frustration at a lack of international and regional efforts to respond to the disaster, and demonstrated perceived links between geopolitics and the aid that was provided, and anger at local authorities.³⁸ It also highlighted positive perceptions of front-line responders with a strong social media presence that showed their interventions by putting images on appropriate social media platforms of how they were actively helping. Overall, most aid agencies that were active in Libya preferred not to engage with flood-affected communities on social media, and thus contributed to the perception that little international help was provided in the aftermath of the disaster. For the full report, please read the [bulletin](#) and [recommendations](#).

Floods in Tartous governorate, Syria, 2024

Social media sentiment analysis of the efforts to respond to the floods in the government-controlled Tartous province in January 2024 showed mainly positive reactions among local populations to the emergency aid efforts. In other parts of Syria, however, social media users expressed scepticism that aid would reach those who needed it the most, indicating deeply held perceptions that corruption related to aid delivery is widespread. (See [full report](#)).

Earthquake in Syria and Türkiye, 2023

Social media sentiment analysis among communities affected by the devastating earthquake in northern Syria and southern Türkiye in February 2023 highlighted a deep distrust towards aid agencies in north-east and north-west Syria among many different groups of social media users for varying underlying reasons. Some social media users accused aid agencies of using the disaster to bring firearms into the country, while others saw evidence of corruption in aid transfers, or even feared that aid agencies would hand over individuals to Syrian state authorities. Many aid agencies prioritised logistics to bring in aid and did not engage directly with concerns and allegations that were being read or scrolled through by millions of people on social media networks.

In Türkiye, social media sentiment analysis was able to track how a relatively technical controversy over the transaction between two aid agencies related to the sale of tents became a politically charged topic during the country's election campaign in May 2023, resulting in drastically declining trust in aid agencies among millions of people exposed to nothing more than snippets of the technical facts.

Social media analysis has thus taught us the following:

- Natural disasters and the support provided to affected communities are highly likely to be emotionally discussed on social media.
- The dominant sentiment towards aid efforts or individual aid agencies can be formed based on aspects that may not seem important from a technical aid perspective.
- Sentiments towards aid are often long-lived and resurface when new circumstances trigger related memories or associations. Strongly negative reactions towards well-intended programmes can take by surprise international aid responders unfamiliar with previous interventions when these responders fail to anticipate reactions that are a response to both the immediate context and similar past events.

Social media monitoring and previous lessons learned from analyses can be part of reputation risk management strategies and the general strengthening of aid agencies' conflict sensitivity. Monitoring discussions and opinions on social media helps agencies to understand changing public sentiments and concerns. This is a new approach that represents the developing thinking about the advantages of an anticipatory mindset. When target community sentiments are understood, aid organisations can take steps to influence these sentiments by using appropriately adapted communication techniques. A proactive social media strategy is thus central to reducing the chance of negative sentiments spreading widely, particularly when they might be based on a perception of agencies' lack of effort in responding to a disaster. Moreover, a proactive communication strategy requires a good understanding of the context. In some cases, this may require communicating in locally marginalised languages, but bearing in mind that language may be part of the fault lines of a conflict.³⁹ In collaboration with colleagues responsible for SRM, it is important to anticipate when a negative reputation can endanger agency staff or operations. The perspective provided by the anticipatory mindset can, therefore, be useful for all types of humanitarian programming, including AA programmes, because it facilitates humanitarian access and strengthens programme implementation.

Social media monitoring and previous lessons learned from analyses can be part of reputation risk management strategies and the general strengthening of aid agencies' conflict sensitivity.

Social media sentiment analysis to strengthen conflict sensitivity

Conflict is often characterised by different communities holding different beliefs and perceptions. Communicating in a conflict-sensitive way requires an understanding of competing narratives and then taking steps to avoid fuelling resentments, including unintentionally. Disaster response communication needs to engage with social media to reach a wide population, but achieving conflict-sensitive communication in this space is particularly challenging. When appropriately used, the anticipatory mindset is aware of the risks and opportunities involved in this process and prepares guidance before any crisis occurs.

Conflict sensitivity and medical neutrality in conflict

The rise of social media is reshaping conflict awareness. Personal experiences of the horrors of war or the aftermath of disasters are now shared with millions, creating a direct line between those living through conflict or crises and global audiences. This unfiltered flow of information seems to have contributed to disillusionment with humanitarian agencies and their perceived inability to effectively protect conflict-affected populations from the harm caused by violence and natural disasters. There are high expectations of what humanitarian agencies can or should do, yet the principles of neutrality and impartiality in conflict are rarely understood by social media influencers. Statements issued by aid agencies expressing a willingness to engage with all sides of a conflict are frequently interpreted as these agencies being partial toward one of the conflicting parties, who, in the eyes of many social media users, may be seen as illegitimate or responsible for exacerbating violence or conflict.

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In countries like Burkina Faso and South Sudan, health care providers have been labelled “traitors” and “evil”, with some social media users arguing that these agencies deserve to have violence inflicted on them because they express a commitment to treat everyone, regardless of their affiliation in the conflict. (The full reports can be read [here](#) for Burkina Faso, and [here](#) for South Sudan)

Public health programmes interpreted along conflictual political fault lines

Social media can be used to share partisan interpretations of assumed motives and intentions behind a public health programme that can develop into serious challenges for effective programme implementation and even security risks for humanitarian staff. In a country or society, variations of the same allegations tend to emerge across different emergencies. This allows aid agencies to anticipate particular arguments and allegations, and prepare a communication strategy ahead of a crisis to deal with them.

For example, after WHO declared mpox (formerly known as monkeypox) a public health emergency of international concern in August 2024, reactions on social media in the Democratic Republic of the Congo mirrored those from the 10th, 11th and 12th Ebola outbreaks. Social media users questioned the legitimacy of the outbreak and suggested it had been engineered by corrupt officials to siphon off aid money. Such allegations undermine public health efforts by implying that there is no need for affected communities to follow official government advice. Other accusations implicated foreign or «Western» powers in the mpox outbreak, claiming they were intentionally harming African populations, thus potentially legitimising attacks on officials tasked with implementing public health measures. (Please find here the brief on [mpox](#), and [here](#) and [here](#) on regarding Ebola)

The anticipatory mindset: mitigating impact

To mitigate the risks posed by social media misinformation, an anticipatory mindset can guide early action by doing the following:

Know the arguments:

- Agencies should monitor attitudes toward public health measures over time to anticipate predictable, context-specific reactions. They should prepare a response plan to deal with common types of misinformation and disinformation, and be ready to adapt their communication approach based on current sentiments when an emergency is declared. They should then implement this adapted response plan together with public health measures.
- Agencies should monitor opinions of humanitarian and medical ethical principles, recognising that knowledge of these principles may be limited among social media influencers. Language that aid agencies see as neutral may be perceived as siding with aggressors, so messaging must be chosen carefully.

Understand how information spreads:

- On social media, information spreads through existing networks. In conflict-affected contexts, even objectively neutral disaster-related information can quickly assume a political dimension when it is shared by particular groups. Understanding how information circulates and is interpreted in these networks is critical to maintaining conflict-sensitive communication.

Conclusion and recommendations

The anticipatory mindset sets out how the proactive analysis of possible future hazards can help prepare and mitigate risks to programme implementation. Formal AA programmes focus on natural hazards and rely on data modelling to trigger action planned for in the preparation phase. The SRM anticipatory mindset, the skills of conflict-sensitivity analysts, and the increasing importance of CCEA are important elements that can strengthen AA programmes, as well as other humanitarian responses, by enabling improved humanitarian access and programme success. SRM and CCEA are also driven by an anticipatory mindset and use data to plan responses to crises. There are opportunities to integrate these systematic practices into AA programme design, but this will require an expanded use of data sources and critical and strategic thinking in terms of data and information that goes beyond simple data modelling.

This discussion note was a first exploration of the process of developing a framework for an anticipatory mindset moving beyond its application in AA programmes. Many further opportunities will occur to apply this mindset both within and outside of AA, and several recommendations are laid out below.

Recommendations to expand the anticipatory mindset

- **Extend the anticipatory mindset to the AA programme support sectors of SRM and communication**

The anticipatory mindset is the foundation of effective anticipatory programmes. It is essential to extend this approach to all supporting sectors, including SRM and communications with disaster-affected communities and people. By fostering anticipation in these sectors, responses can become more proactive and conflict-sensitive, helping to mitigate the impact of human-made hazards/disasters. This is particularly critical in conflict-affected zones, where the attitudes and actions of conflict parties can hinder humanitarian access and aid programme success. Additionally, poorly chosen terminology and approaches in communications can exacerbate tensions and fuel further conflict.

- **Extend the anticipatory mindset to key humanitarian sectors outside of natural-hazard-centred AA programmes**

Applying the anticipatory mindset to essential humanitarian sectors – such as health, food security and WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) – can greatly enhance the effectiveness of these programmes, particularly in conflict-affected settings. While it is impossible to predict precisely when and where violence will disrupt humanitarian efforts, the anticipatory approach allows agencies to prepare responses to deal as effectively as possible with the potential impact of such violence on conflict-affected communities and humanitarian programmes. This proactive thinking focuses on mitigating the consequences of human-made disruptions or disasters, helping to minimise harm to civilians and ensure more effective programme delivery.

- **Utilise existing frameworks**

Even without being explicitly labelled as AA, the anticipatory mindset already exists in SRM. This discussion note does not suggest developing new SRM tools that use different terminology, but rather raising awareness within AA programmes of this existing mindset that has its own terms and standards. By better integrating SRM thinking into AA programmes and using insights from acceptance-focused SRM, humanitarian actors can learn to better anticipate the behaviour of local stakeholders and adjust planning in a conflict-sensitive way to achieve better programme outcomes.

- **Base all anticipatory methods on comprehensive context and conflict analysis**

Effective anticipatory thinking relies on a comprehensive understanding of the context in which aid organisations operate. Achieving this understanding requires adequate time and resources, along with a conflict-sensitive approach to ensure that the programme does not exacerbate existing tensions. Strengthening this process involves building partnerships with other humanitarian organisations and establishing communication channels with local populations. This collaboration helps agencies to understand risks and facilitate access to programme areas.

- **Push for increased cooperation within and between organisations**

All humanitarian sectors should be viewed as interconnected and working in tandem. Treating these sectors as isolated entities limits the available information, making it more difficult to anticipate the impact of human actions, mitigate their impacts, and achieve programme success. This principle also applies to cooperation among humanitarian organisations: enhanced collaboration increases the quality and quantity of the data and knowledge that is available, improving overall programme effectiveness.

An Anticipatory Mindset

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For suggestions for improvement, training or any other feedback, please write to us at info@insecurityinsight.org

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