EARLY AID, LIVELIHOOD PROTECTION, OR BOTH?

What Impact Evaluations Reveal About Anticipatory Action

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Introduction

Anticipatory action has become a prominent feature of the humanitarian system. Over the past decade, evaluative research has trickled in, including randomized and quasi-experimental studies from Bangladesh, Nepal, Mongolia, and northeast Nigeria, as well as broader syntheses from WFP, FAO, the START network, REAP, and Tufts. Earlier studies compared anticipatory assistance (most often cash transfers) to receiving nothing. More recent impact evaluations have compared assistance before and after shocks, shedding light on potential trade-offs. Taken together, this literature provides strong evidence that acting early can reduce short-term hardship and, in many cases, help households protect themselves before shocks fully unfold.

Yet a closer reading of this evidence reveals that impacts vary widely across contexts, depending on the type, timing, and predictability of shocks, as well as the design and scale of anticipatory responses. In some settings, outcomes of anticipatory action closely resemble those achieved through traditional, post-shock assistance, with the primary difference being that benefits come earlier. In others, anticipatory action appears to unlock different strategies, enabling households to protect assets, avert major losses, or otherwise adapt in ways that may not be available after a shock occurs.

These divergent findings raise questions critical for policy and practice: When is anticipatory action a tool to improve welfare? When can it protect livelihoods and build longer-term resilience? And what factors influence which outcomes?

Although our understanding of these questions has evolved over recent years, anticipatory action in practice is still catching up to the evidence. Closing this gap is especially pressing in the context of tightening humanitarian resources and an increase in climate related crises. Expanding anticipatory action indiscriminately may risk overextending the model, at the expense of investing adequately in more holistic resilience building solutions that may be needed.

This brief deals with these questions by drawing primarily on rigorous impact evaluations of anticipatory action. The evidence reviewed here underscores that anticipatory action can play different roles depending on context and design. Making these differences explicit is key to aligning anticipatory action programs with the outcomes they can credibly deliver.

When is anticipatory action just earlier aid?

Early evidence showed how the timing of anticipatory action can influence its effectiveness. In Bangladesh, earlier cash transfers reduced the loss of assets and improved recovery from floods compared to no assistance. In Mongolia, earlier assistance was linked to lower livestock mortality during extreme winters. Notably, these outcomes were better for each additional day of lead time between receiving assistance and the onset of the shocks. Here, the main advantage of anticipatory action is in its timing: assistance arrives before markets are disrupted, and before households resort to harmful coping strategies. As a result, households can, for instance, purchase food before prices rise, sustain consumption through a shock, and avoid taking on high-interest debt. Additional analyses from the Start Network echoed this finding: even small shifts in when help arrives, sometimes just days, can meaningfully change outcomes, underscoring how sensitive welfare gains are to the timing of assistance during rapid-onset crises.

Much of the strongest evidence on anticipatory action comes from recent randomized controlled trials (RCTs) which compared anticipatory action and reactive assistance in rapid-onset flood settings. In both Nepal and Bangladesh for example, anticipatory cash transfers ($115 and $41, respectively) significantly improved food security and psychosocial wellbeing for recipients in the short run. In Bangladesh, recipients also avoided costly borrowing and increased savings compared to households that did not receive cash ahead of the flood. However, once the post-shock group received cash transfers of the same value, the two groups quickly converged, and food security and welfare were comparable. Endline outcomes were similar despite early differences. By the time households recovered, there was no discernable difference in wellbeing between the two groups.

Timing of assistance still matters. In these examples, what differs is *when* households benefit, not *how much* or *in what ways*. In these cases, anticipatory action is best understood as offering a temporal benefit, accelerating welfare gains mainly through households using cash assistance to meet food and other basic needs. This pattern applies equally to those who receive anticipatory transfers and post-shock transfers. As such, the impacts of anticipatory action resemble those eventually achieved through reactive assistance, rather than unlocking new or better livelihood outcomes over time.

An optimistic interpretation of the findings from Nepal and Bangladesh is that anticipatory action does not appear to be a trade-off per se; earlier gains in food security do not correspond with relatively lower food security later. A more cautious interpretation is that, given the rapid convergence of outcomes between the anticipatory and post-shock assistance recipients, the aggregate welfare gains associated with anticipatory action may be modest at best. In the Nepal and Bangladesh cases, they appear broadly comparable to those achieved through well-timed reactive assistance.

When does anticipatory action protect assets and livelihoods?

By contrast, other studies from Mongolia and Nigeria show that anticipatory action can generate fundamentally different, longer-term benefits, particularly when shocks are more severe and threaten major asset loss. In these settings, the unique value of anticipatory action lies less in the timing and more in the opportunity it creates for risk-reducing actions and investments to preserve future income generating potential, which reactive assistance simply arrives too late to enable.

In the case of Northern Nigeria, for example, anticipatory action did not improve short-term outcomes compared to post-shock assistance. Despite being delivered earlier, anticipatory cash did not produce significant differences in food consumption, expenditures, or subjective wellbeing compared to post shock assistance. However, the large transfer ($400) did unlock a range of proactive, protective, and adaptive decisions that households could only undertake *before* the shock fully unfolded. These included reinforcing shelters, safeguarding assets, pre-positioning resources, and preparing for potential displacement. Such actions are likely to shape future livelihood trajectories, and cannot easily be replicated once a shock has materialized.

A similar pattern was found in Mongolia, where early cash transfers ($236) produced limited average improvements in immediate consumption but helped poorer herders avert large-scale livestock losses. The transfer allowed the most vulnerable herders to maintain a critical threshold of animals during an extreme winter. By preventing livestock loss, anticipatory action influenced how assets fared beyond the shock period in ways that post-shock assistance could not replicate.

In both the Nigeria and Mongolia cases, anticipatory action's value derives not from accelerating welfare gains, but from preserving or expanding the set of viable livelihood strategies available to households before losses narrow their future options. Though neither of these studies has measured longer-term effects, by reducing losses of productive assets, anticipatory action may have also protected households' future income generation potential.

What influences whether anticipatory action leads to livelihood protection?

Anticipatory action fared better than reactive aid at affecting livelihood outcomes only in a subset of cases. Such outcomes can include asset protection, productive investments, preserving incomes, avoiding agricultural losses, and others that preserve households' economic foundations and future earning capacity. Understanding the conditions under which these livelihood protection outcomes emerge is essential for identifying where to concentrate early action efforts to deliver these benefits. Across the available evidence, three factors stand out as particularly important in determining whether early assistance leads to livelihood protection.

Figure 1: Factors influencing the likely outcomes of anticipatory action interventions

Factors	Likely Outcome: **Basic Needs**	Likely Outcome: **Livelihood Protection**
Shock Severity	Shock expected to be moderate, resulting in manageable losses	Shock expected to be severe, resulting in extensive losses
Design of Pre-arranged Financing	Low value transfers, or installments	Large, lump sum transfers
Clarity of Available Actions	Options limited, unclear, or high risk	Clear, low-risk actions available

Factor One: Does a forecasted shock threaten losses that would significantly constrain future livelihood options?

The *severity of the forecasted shock*, and the extent to which losses would threaten households' future livelihood options, appears to influence the effectiveness of anticipatory action in protecting livelihoods. While virtually all shocks carry some risk of lasting harm, evidence suggests that anticipatory assistance is more likely to be used in protective or adaptive ways when the anticipated shock is more severe.

Importantly, this is not a causal mechanism that existing evaluations were designed to test directly, but it is nonetheless an emerging pattern across studies. Where forecasted shocks are expected to be more moderate, early assistance appears more likely to be used to stabilize consumption and meet basic needs. This pattern is seen in flood contexts like in the recent Bangladesh and Nepal studies, where anticipatory action improved food security in the immediate aftermath of flooding. However, these floods, while disruptive, were relatively moderate and did not typically threaten widespread livelihood collapse or asset loss. Correspondingly, relatively few households undertook major proactive actions ahead of time.

By contrast, in contexts where forecasts project more severe shocks, like extreme flooding combined with conflict and risks of displacement in northeast Nigeria, or extreme winters in Mongolia, early assistance appears more likely to be used for forward-looking actions that are difficult or impossible to take once the shock occurs. In these settings, households face a credible threat of losing productive assets, housing, and livelihoods. Evaluations from Nigeria and Mongolia show that anticipatory cash did not always generate large consumption gains relative to post-shock assistance. But it did enable households to undertake protective and adaptive actions such as safeguarding assets, reinforcing shelters, and preparing for displacement, that plausibly shaped post-shock trajectories in more durable ways.

These findings suggest that the value of anticipatory action may depend on whether the severity of the anticipated shock makes losses sufficiently likely to change household decisions before the shock occurs. When the threat of loss is high, early assistance may help households to protect future earning potential and make decisions in ways that reactive aid cannot. When shocks are predicted or perceived to be less severe, anticipatory action is more likely to function primarily as earlier aid, accelerating welfare gains without generating lasting divergence in livelihood outcomes.

Factor Two: Are the scale and design of anticipatory action interventions fit for purpose?

Even where forecasted shocks threaten substantial losses, anticipatory action is only likely to generate better livelihood outcomes than reactive assistance if its design enables households to act decisively within the pre-shock window. Across available evidence, differences in transfer size, structure, and intended use may help explain why anticipatory action sometimes enables livelihood protection and longer-term resilience, and in other cases functions primarily as earlier aid, with outcomes converging once post-shock assistance arrives.

One of the clearest insights from anticipatory action design comes from FAO's recent research on anticipatory cash transfers in Somalia. In this study, households were randomized to receive support either as a lump sum transfer ($210, delivered once) or as three monthly instalments ($70 per month) ahead of a forecasted drought. While both types of cash improved food security and financial stability, only the lump sum transfers significantly reduced livestock losses in the short term. This suggests that when early assistance is intended to enable asset protection, such as in pastoralist systems where losses can be rapid, smaller cash installments may arrive "on time" but still be poorly matched to the scale of required actions. installments may arrive "on time" but still be poorly matched to the scale of required actions.

This distinction is important for understanding when anticipatory action is most likely to generate livelihood benefits. Protecting productive assets can require large, up-front expenditures (e.g., for fodder stockpiling, veterinary care, or temporary relocation) that cannot easily be financed through smaller, staggered payments. Installments, even when timely, appear better suited to smoothing consumption than enabling the kinds of time-bound actions that protect and preserve livelihoods.

Evidence from outside anticipatory action contexts points in a similar direction. A randomized-controlled trial by Mercy Corps in Iraq compared different cash transfer schedules with the same total transfer value. Results showed that lump-sum transfers were more likely to enable larger, one-off expenditures (like shelter repair, education costs, and productive assets), while smaller, repeated transfers were more effective at smoothing short-term consumption. The clear lesson is that design choices on cash transfer structures can shape what households are able to do with cash and, by extension, the outcomes anticipatory action can realistically be expected to deliver.

The size of anticipatory cash transfers also appears to influence the types of outcomes observed. In flood-based anticipatory action programs in Bangladesh and Nepal for example, transfers were relatively modest, typically in the range of $40–60, and were largely calibrated to support households to meet short-term food security and basic needs. As such, these programs produced strong early impacts on food security, wellbeing, and coping. By contrast, in northeast Nigeria, the anticipatory transfer was substantially larger ($400, delivered as a one-off lump sum). Here, anticipatory cash generated limited short-term improvements in consumption relative to post-shock assistance, but enabled a range of protective actions that could plausibly shape livelihoods over a longer horizon.

This evidence suggests that transfer values should be assessed not only against minimum consumption needs, but against the actual cost of the early actions a program seeks to enable. Where transfers are small or delivered in instalments, anticipatory action is more likely to function as earlier aid, by reducing hardship during the shock, but producing outcomes that quickly converge with those of reactive assistance. Where transfers are larger, anticipatory action appears more capable of enabling asset or livelihood protection that reactive aid cannot easily replicate.

Finally, emerging evidence suggests that in some contexts, anticipatory action may be more effective when early cash is paired with complementary inputs that help households act on early resources more effectively. Layered support (such as targeted in-kind inputs or services) may in certain settings augment the effects of early cash assistance by easing non-financial constraints or expanding feasible early actions.

In Mongolia, for example, an anticipatory action program combined cash transfers with in-kind veterinary kits. The intervention reduced livestock mortality and improved offspring survival during an extreme winter, pointing to the potential importance of addressing non-financial constraints, like access to veterinary resources, alongside early cash support. However, because all beneficiary households received the same package, the study could not isolate the added value of the in-kind component relative to cash alone. So, while the findings are suggestive, they do not allow firm conclusions about whether and when layered inputs amplify the impacts of anticipatory cash.

More broadly, this highlights both the promise and the current limits of the evidence on multi-component anticipatory action. While theory and qualitative insights suggest that pairing cash with targeted in-kind support or services may be important where markets, technical capacity, or access to services are constrained, impact evaluations on anticipatory action have not yet been designed to test these combinations explicitly. Understanding when additional components meaningfully enhance outcomes—and how they affect cost-effectiveness, feasibility, and scalability—remains an open question and a clear priority for future research.

Factor Three: Do shock characteristics create clear and actionable windows for protecting livelihoods?

Finally, anticipatory action is more likely to protect livelihoods if households can translate assistance into concrete, forward-looking actions that make a difference for post-shock livelihoods and wellbeing. This depends on whether there are feasible opportunities to take early actions. Pre-defining such actions with local stakeholders—a standard practice in most guidance on anticipatory action—may aid in this. Livelihood benefits also appear to be based on whether households have the capacity and incentives to undertake anticipatory actions in practice, and whether the broader risk environment allows such decisions to be made at all.

Crisis contexts differ markedly in the availability and clarity of actionable early responses. Anticipatory action appears more likely to protect livelihoods in settings where shocks unfold within well-defined windows and threaten specific, identifiable losses that households know how to avert. In northeast Nigeria, for example, anticipatory cash provided before severe flooding in a conflict-affected setting enabled households to reinforce shelters, safeguard productive assets, and prepare for displacement. In these cases, early cash assistance can meaningfully expand households' options to act at a critical moment.

In other contexts, particularly slow-onset or cumulative crises, opportunities for decisive early action are more diffuse, uncertain, or emerge gradually. Even where impending risks are obvious, households may lack clear pathways through which early assistance can be translated into durable advantages. In such settings, anticipatory cash can still improve welfare, but may not unlock ways to protect livelihoods. This limitation was seen in Niger, where cash delivered before a forecasted drought led to net improvements in household food security compared to traditional humanitarian response. However, in emergencies where risks evolve over long timelines and coincide with other stressors (e.g., insecurity and crop infestations in Niger), anticipatory action appears less likely to produce different livelihood outcomes than those achieved through reactive aid. In Niger, none were observed.

Evidence from Somalia reinforces this point, showing how overlapping and interacting risks can constrain the scope for meaningful early action. During the 2021 Horn of Africa drought, pastoralists faced a dense web of simultaneous threats, including increasing drought stress, flash flooding in some areas, conflict and insecurity, economic disruption, and displacement risks, which made decisions ahead of time exceptionally complex. In this environment, actions that might mitigate one risk often heightened exposure to others. For example, although pastoralists were aware of drought forecasts, many hesitated to sell livestock early or migrate in response. Selling animals too soon risked locking in losses if rains improved, while migration risked exposing households to insecurity. These were not simply information gaps or liquidity constraints, but structural trade-offs. While an early cash transfer may have helped households cope with immediate needs, they would not have simplified the underlying risk calculations or created clear, low-regret early actions.

These findings help explain why anticipatory action is particularly difficult to operationalize as a single, trigger-based tool in multi-hazard settings. Where risks do not unfold sequentially or predictably, and where viable early actions are not obvious, early assistance is less likely to translate into protective livelihood decisions. Anticipatory support in such contexts is unlikely to change the decisions households are able or willing to make, and therefore may not produce outcomes that differ meaningfully from well-timed reactive assistance.

Conclusions

Program designers and policy makers are rightly asking: Is anticipatory action basically a welfare-improvement tool like cash transfers, or can it meaningfully protect livelihoods and build longer-term resilience? The evidence from impact evaluations to date shows that anticipatory action holds the potential to support both—though possibly not at the same time or with the same design.

Findings suggest that anticipatory action is more likely to **prevent acute suffering earlier** when: shocks are less severe, cash transfer sizes are modest, and where hazards unfold gradually or unpredictably. When the primary goal is helping households to smooth consumption and avoid short-term harm, the timing of assistance is the most essential feature—every day of earlier action makes a difference.

By contrast, anticipatory action appears well placed to **protect livelihoods** when: hazards are severe enough to cause high damage or losses and are sufficiently predictable; and when cash transfer sizes are large enough to finance major expenditures in risk reduction, and are potentially paired with complementary forms of assistance. In such contexts, the value of anticipatory action lies in *what* early assistance allows households to do that reactive aid simply cannot once a shock is underway.

This does not imply that one aim or design is universally superior. In many contexts, where recovery is relatively rapid and risks of major loss are limited, designs focused on timely welfare protection may be entirely appropriate, and convergence of outcomes with those of reactive assistance should not be interpreted as failure. The question in these cases becomes one of cost and value judgements: Is anticipatory action more expensive than similar post-shock assistance? And if so, is that worth the benefits of reducing suffering earlier? More and better cost analysis is needed on anticipatory action versus post-shock assistance to confidently answer these questions—a key part of the research agenda going forward.

Where anticipatory action is expected to do more than accelerate consumption support by preserving assets or preventing livelihood collapse, then program design and scale become central to whether those expectations are realistic. Benefits depend not only on *when* assistance is provided, but on whether the size and structure of that assistance are fit for the actions they are meant to enable.

These findings have clear strategic implications. Treating anticipatory action as a universally applicable solution for both short-term and long-term outcomes risks overextending the model. The implication is not to try to scale anticipatory action everywhere, but to deploy it deliberately. This means matching the design to the context and desired outcomes based on what we now know about when and where anticipatory action is most likely to yield welfare versus livelihood outcomes. Making these distinctions explicit is critical for a more disciplined and effective use of anticipatory approaches.

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