



Policy Brief

How can anticipatory action better support pastoralists?

Summary

Pastoralist livelihoods rely on mobility and flexibility to make the most of highly variable and often unpredictable dryland environments.

Anticipatory action – broadly understood as the proactive mitigation of crises before they occur – is yet to achieve a substantive impact in these areas.

This is only partly due to coordination and financing challenges; it also reflects an incongruity between mechanistic, rigid, top-down approaches and the collaborative and improvisational ways in which pastoralists pursue their livelihoods, including during shocks and disasters.

Making anticipatory action work for pastoralists requires a shift towards locally grounded planning, a focus on the role of local government authorities and other trusted community leaders, and a reorientation of support towards the existing anticipatory practices of pastoralists.

Key messages

- Anticipatory action stands at a critical juncture. As aid budgets shrink, we must resist the pull of centralisation and rigid, top-down systems.
- Mainstreaming anticipatory action in pastoralist areas requires a renewed focus on local governments/authorities/other trusted community leaders. Its value and sustainability hinge on strong relationships between these authorities and impacted communities.
- External assistance should focus on supporting the existing anticipatory practices undertaken by pastoralist communities, including mobility, flexible economic engagement with shifting resources and utilisation of multiple forms of knowledge/information.
- Anticipatory action is not neutral, it shapes institutions, activities and practices in a variety of complex ways, and can even lead to unintended negative outcomes.

Opportunities to act

- Donors, governments and development agencies to invest in initiatives that improve the transparency and accessibility of anticipatory action decision-making processes, including how budgets are allocated and how planning decisions are made, while also supporting pastoralist communities to engage meaningfully with these systems in ways that strengthen accountability and responsiveness.
- Upscale approaches that make funding available at the community level, supporting existing and new locally led anticipatory practices.
- To improve coordination, focus more on the relationships between pastoralist communities and local/sub-national authorities, ensuring meaningful public participation within national planning, budgeting and governance.
- Implementers of anticipatory action to be more willing to engage with and work through trusted customary authorities in pastoralist areas, including local religious leaders and institutions and women's groups, among others.

Across the Horn of Africa, pastoralists prepare for and manage shocks through a variety of strategies, ranging from mobility to informal social assistance.

Increasingly, this locally-led work is supported by local authorities and institutions who use forecasts or early warning information to plan anticipatory actions in dialogue with citizens.

At national and regional levels also, multiple policies, funds and institutions focus on preparedness, disaster management and anticipatory action.

Despite all this, climate change and the legacies of historic marginalization and under-development continue to constrain disaster preparedness and management in dryland areas. Consequently, pastoralists face hunger and vulnerability on a regular basis due to the impacts of predictable shocks.

'Anticipatory action' has attracted significant donor interest in recent years, promising more timely and therefore impactful support through mechanistic, trigger-based systems structured around forecasts and early warnings.

To date, this modality has struggled to deliver on these promises at scale, with reports emphasizing delayed and inefficient support during recent shocks, such as the catastrophic drought of 2020-2023 in eastern Africa (Farr et al. 2022).

In light of this, much work is underway to improve, scale and institutionalize anticipatory action.

However, such limited impacts raise important questions about the novelty of the approach, compared to past forms of disaster preparedness and action and, further, what anticipatory action can do or should encompass.

It also raises question about the risks of diverting attention and support towards a modality that is increasingly framed through reductive and technocratic understandings of risk and response in which complex problems are seen as solvable through simple, technical solutions.

In reality, this not only makes it difficult to understand and manage emerging risks (which are often complex, interlinked, and/or cascading) but also masks an array of competing approaches and understandings.

Perhaps more importantly, these unnuanced discussions, often oriented towards top-down approaches at the national level and heavily reliant on external support, risk drawing attention away from the locally led disaster management practices of pastoralists and the work of local authorities in pastoralist areas, both of which can legitimately be understood as forms of anticipatory action.

Localization

As aid budgets shrink, disaster management in dryland areas risks becoming increasingly technocratic, centralized and mechanistic in ways that undermine both response and accountability at the local level, bypassing existing strategies, institutions and practices that deserve support.

While national and regional policies are important, they are only valuable if they are implemented in ways that speak to the needs of local communities and stimulates action at the local level.

Mainstreaming anticipatory action is therefore not only a challenge of national and regional coordination. It requires investment in the ongoing work of local authorities and institutions that are directly accountable to pastoralists and have ongoing, two-way relationships with them.

This includes both local governments and customary authorities, which already frequently draw on forecasts and early warnings to prepare for and manage disasters (Nassef et al. 2025).

Sustainable anticipatory action must be rooted at this local level, not in top-down systems where critical decisions are detached from the contexts where they matter most.

Such formal structures and policies are most valuable when they facilitate investment in and support for the knowledge, customary institutions and practices that already sustain life for pastoralists in the drylands.

These include institutions that structure rangeland monitoring and management, deliberative decision making during unpredictable crises and locally led social assistance. They also include practices such as mobility, herd splitting, lending (of money, commodities and livestock), adaptive resource-use and networked distribution of information, equipment and commodities (Mohamed and Nori 2024; Derbyshire et al. 2025; Hassan et al. 2026).

Rather than designing interventions externally, funds should be made available at the local level to support this world of collaborative action.

Civic engagement and public participation

In the same vein, existing capacities can be strengthened through training, access to information, equipment, technologies and other innovations.

A critical component of such capacity strengthening is civic engagement, focused on providing pastoralists with a clear understanding of the structures and systems that shape anticipatory action in their area. This includes decision-making (i.e., who and where), legal frameworks, and budgetary cycles and allocations.

A clearer picture of these factors will facilitate more incisive and informed advocacy at the local level, helping to drive a shift towards pre-financed approaches to disaster management rather than reactive responses.

It is also critical to advocate nationally and regionally on the value of community-led approaches to managing shocks and disasters (which, as we have emphasized, can be seen as anticipatory actions in their own right).

Without these shifts, anticipatory action risks undermining existing institutions and relationships, creating unsustainable forms of mechanistic support that bypass what works and what is trusted.

Climate hazards are both complex and multifaceted, a point that is particularly clear with the enduring challenge of drought, which unfolds gradually and often unpredictably, intersecting with multiple other shocks and cascading impacts.

Such hazards cannot be addressed through simple, quick fix solutions. They require a focus on approaches that actively support and enhance both formal local government capacities and customary local institutions and livelihood practices.

Ways forward

Making anticipatory action work for pastoralists depends less on improving data or trigger design and more on understanding how shocks are anticipated and managed at the local level by pastoralist populations.

The scope of anticipatory action can and should be extended to encompass more locally relevant and recognizable forms of preparation and management.

Achieving this requires more transparent, locally accountable ways of working, in which pastoralist communities are meaningfully engaged in government-led planning and decision-making.

It also requires a renewed focus on how local authorities already prepare for and manage shocks via collaborative relationships with their constituents, often engaging with customary institutions, practices and knowledge systems in functional and contextually effective ways.

More

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In April 2026, the Jameel Observatory for Food Security Early Action convened an ‘evidence capitalization workshop’ with partners to synthesize insights and key messages on issues and opportunities that can advance early action for dryland resilience and prosperity in the Horn of Africa. This brief and accompanying short video are products of this exercise.

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