



# Acting Before a Flood to Protect the Most Vulnerable

## An Independent Review of WFP's Anticipatory Cash Transfers in Bangladesh



World Food Programme

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Since 2015, the **World Food Programme (WFP)** has been collaborating closely with the Government of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre (RCCC) to support the development and implementation of **anticipatory humanitarian assistance** ahead of severe weather events. In July 2020, before what would become one of the **most severe flooding events on record**, [WFP and partners distributed anticipatory cash transfers based on the national early warning system](#).

A **forecast-based anticipatory approach** to humanitarian relief contrasts with the traditional humanitarian response model in which assistance is based on materialized needs after a shock has occurred. While initiatives that explicitly **link impact-based weather forecasts to predetermined actions and financing** are relatively new in the humanitarian sector, the evidence base in support of the anticipatory approach is growing.

As early as four days before floodwaters reached critical levels, based on a forecast from the national early warning system, WFP sent Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) 4,500 (approximately US\$ 53) using mobile money accounts to vulnerable households along the Jamuna River. The unconditional cash assistance, equivalent to about two weeks' of food expenditures, reached approximately 145,000 vulnerable people. This aimed to **mitigate the impact of the flood shock on the food security, lives and livelihoods of affected populations**, by enabling them to purchase essential supplies such as food and medicine and take preparatory measures such as moving themselves and their assets to safer areas before the floods peaked. This was the **fastest transfer in the history of the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)**, reaching affected households **100 days earlier** when compared to WFP's 2019 flood response.

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In Bangladesh, the [Centre for Disaster Protection \(CDP\)](#), with support from the University of Oxford, OCHA and WFP, completed an [independent evaluation of WFP's anticipatory cash transfers](#) during the July 2020 floods. The study is a first of its kind, both in terms of the scope of research which focuses on the welfare impact of anticipatory cash transfers in humanitarian settings, in addition to its robust research design where data was collected from over 9,000 households. This research is an important first step in learning more about the added-value of anticipatory assistance, and its transformational potential for more effective and efficient humanitarian aid.

**Anticipatory actions prior to predictable crises are essential to avoid irreversible impacts for people and communities.**



## Main results

- Anticipatory cash transfers were **mostly spent on food and water**, with households **36 percent less likely to go a day without eating** during the flood.
- Three months after the flood, households that had received the transfer reported significantly **higher child and adult food consumption and wellbeing**. They also experienced **lower asset loss, engaged in less costly borrowing after the flood, and reported higher earnings potential**;
- Beneficiary households took **more preparatory actions to reduce the impact of the flood**. Households that received the cash transfer were 12 percent more likely to evacuate household members and 17 percent more likely to evacuate their livestock. As a result, transfer-receiving households were 8 percent less likely to lose small livestock and 5 percent less likely to lose poultry during and after the flooding.
- **The cash transfers were more beneficial for harder to reach households located in vulnerable lands** and areas where households are poorer. This highlights the potential for using geographical targeting to further scale up the impact of anticipatory humanitarian action.

## Key take-aways

1. **Early action in a crisis is essential, as failing to act early has real welfare costs.** During the 2019 floods in Bangladesh, households started to receive humanitarian assistance about 100 days after the floods. The evaluation study shows that providing support ahead of the flood can decrease the uptake of coping strategies that can negatively affect future wellbeing such as reducing child consumption and costly borrowing, helping households achieve a quicker recovery and long-run welfare benefits.
2. **Anticipatory cash transfers are an effective measure to maintain the food security of vulnerable households** during an extreme weather event, reduce asset loss and damage while also enhancing the adoption of preparedness measures. Cash transfers should be combined with additional anticipatory measures, such as dissemination of early warning information and evacuation support to achieve a stronger impact, and can be integrated with timely post-flood assistance to meet the recovery needs of affected communities.
3. **More learning is needed.** There are significant challenges to conducting rigorous impact evaluations in humanitarian settings without withholding time-sensitive support to vulnerable households. This requires a commitment and investment of resources from humanitarian partners to learning and using robust M&E methodologies to inform the design and implementation of anticipatory humanitarian assistance.

### Climate & Disaster Risk Reduction Programmes Unit (PRO-C) World Food Programme

Via Cesare Giulio Viola 68/70,  
00148 Rome, Italy - T +39 06 65131  
[climatechange@wfp.org](mailto:climatechange@wfp.org)



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