

CONTENT

ANTICIPATORY ACTION AND DISPLACEMENT

Anticipatory action and displacement

Why anticipatory action for displacement impacts?

Population movement, whether driven by conflict, economic hardship, food insecurity, climate stress, or a combination of these, can generate interconnected humanitarian pressure that extend well beyond the initial movement. People on the move might face disruptions to health, psychosocial wellbeing, family unity, and access to basic services and protection. Meanwhile, host and transit communities can experience strain on essential services, market fluctuations, and potential social tension. Surrounding environments come under pressure through unplanned demands on water sources, waste systems, and national resources. These (secondary) humanitarian impacts are often foreseeable, even when the precise scale and timing of the movement itself are not.

In this context, anticipatory action focuses on anticipating the humanitarian needs that arise as conditions shift from manageable to acute and acting early enough to reduce their severity, rather than aiming to predict displacement itself. Drawing on a combination of external data sources, government statistics, and community-level observations, National Societies can identify emerging signals and inflection points that indicate when coping capacities of migrants en route or host communities as well as the capacities of (humanitarian) support systems are beginning to deteriorate. This approach, grounded in the IFRC's technical guidance on anticipatory action for population movement (see toolbox), emphasizes low-regret actions based on credible information rather than certainty, shifting the focus from predicting events to positioning humanitarian actors to act earlier before humanitarian impacts peak and thus to act more effectively within the fluid realities of human mobility.

Coordination and working groups on anticipatory action and displacement

Within the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, the IFRC-DREF's Anticipatory Pillar convened a technical Working Group on Anticipatory Action for Population Movement from January 2024 to December 2025. Bringing together several National Societies (including the American, Australian, British, Danish, German and Netherlands Red Cross), IFRC departments, and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, this timebound initiative was tasked with clarifying when and how anticipatory action driven by Red Cross Red Crescent Movement actors could meaningfully apply to migration and displacement contexts, particularly where population movement is driven by multiple, overlapping pressures rather than a single hazard. Its work produced three main outputs: a technical guidance note, an sEAP proforma template tailored to population movement and considerations for s/EAP validation criteria, all of which inform the guidance in this chapter (see resources below). At the global level, the [Working Group on Anticipatory Action for Displacement](#), co-chaired by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and hosted by the Anticipation Hub, promotes broader technical collaboration, evidence-building, and joint advocacy to strengthen anticipatory approaches in displacement settings across the humanitarian systems. Both initiatives reflect the potential of anticipatory action to expand beyond climate and weather hazards to address the complex, multi-driver realities of human mobility.

Guiding principles for anticipatory action and population movement

Before identifying where anticipatory action can make a difference and how it can be operationalized along the displacement timeline, it is important to establish the principles that should guide the design, review, and implementation of anticipatory action in displacement contexts. The IFRC technical guidance sets out five central principles:

Readiness over prediction

The objective is not to forecast displacement precisely, but to strengthen readiness for when early signals of rising humanitarian need emerge. Anticipatory action focuses on positioning actors to act earlier rather than waiting for complete information or impact peaks to materialize.

Impact-orientation

Assessments should centre on humanitarian impacts, particularly when conditions indicate rising vulnerability or pressure on essential services, rather than on the scale or probability of movement alone.

Evidence proportionality

Expectations for data quality must be realistic and aligned with what is feasible and accessible in a given context. Where quantitative data are partial or incomplete, credible expert judgement and qualitative information remain essential for informing decisions.

Neutrality and safeguards

Anticipatory action must neither encourage nor deter movement. This extends to how triggers are designed and communicated, avoiding framing or data use that could influence migration choices or compromise the principled nature of humanitarian assistance.

No-categorization principle

Consistent with the Movement's principles of universality and impartiality, the guidance intentionally avoids dividing population movement into fixed types such as internal, cross-border, or mixed. Each context should be assessed on a case-by-case basis to ensure that all at-risk people are considered based on their needs, not their legal status.

These principles underpin both the analytical framework for understanding anticipated impacts and the operational approaches for acting on them, which the following sections outline.

Dimensions of anticipated displacement impacts

Having established why anticipatory action is relevant and what principles should guide it, the next question is what types of displacement impacts can be addressed through anticipatory action. Migration and displacement create interconnected humanitarian pressures that extend beyond the initial act of movement. The IFRC technical guidance identifies three dimensions through which these evolving impacts can be anticipated and acted upon.

- **People on the move** face disruptions to health, psychosocial wellbeing, family unity, and access to basic services and protection, including reliable information and safe referrals. In Djibouti, for instance, the sEAP documents how migrants transiting toward the Arabian Peninsula walk for weeks through arid terrain with virtually no access to water, food, or medical care, while remaining largely unaware of their rights or available services. In Colombia, people forcibly displaced by armed conflict in the Pacific region face prolonged periods in inadequate shelters, loss of livelihoods, and severe psychosocial strain.
- **Host and transit communities** experience pressure on essential services, market fluctuations, and potential social tension. In Djibouti, host communities along transit routes already provide the majority of informal support to people on the move, such as water, food, and economic exchange, but report that this assistance is insufficient to meet the scale of need when impacts peak. In Honduras, municipalities along common migration corridors see their local capacities regularly overwhelmed during peaks in transit flows.
- **Environment and infrastructure** come under stress through unplanned demands on water sources, waste systems, and natural resources, particularly in contexts of prolonged or large-scale displacement, where settlements are not always planned or designed for services to absorb sudden population increases.

By examining these three dimensions, National Societies can identify which risks are most relevant in their context. The following section outlines how anticipatory action for the identified risks and impacts can be operationalized along the displacement timeline.

Approaches for operationalizing anticipatory action along the displacement timeline

The previous section identified what anticipatory action for displacement impacts should address, while this section turns to how it can be put into practice. The IFRC technical guidance and the accompanying sEAP proforma template structure operational design around three stages of the displacement timeline: at the place of origin, in transit, and at longer-term displacement or settlement sites. Which early actions might be feasible or impactful might shift at each stage, and each intervention might be classified differently depending on where in this timeline it falls.

Approach A: At the place of origin

At the place of origin, anticipatory action may focus on early outreach, coordination with authorities, and measures that support safe decisions before movement begins or escalates. Lead times at this stage can be longer, but signals may also be less precise. The IFRC sEAP proforma template outlines a range of illustrative activities for origin contexts, including community information on rights and available services, health checks, distribution of dignity kits and other essential items, coordination with authorities, and the dissemination of messages to prevent family separation. As operational experience grows, this stage may become a more prominent feature of future protocols particularly in contexts where seasonal or cyclical movement patterns provide sufficient lead times.

Approach B: In transit

In transit, lead times are typically shorter and actions need to be implementable rapidly along known routes. The Djibouti sEAP, for example, is designed specifically around this stage: migrants crossing from the Horn of Africa toward the Arabian Peninsula walk for approximately two to three weeks across the country, providing a window to deploy services at entry points, along transit routes, and at regrouping and existing points. The protocol uses IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix weekly flow monitoring data as its trigger, with a fixed threshold that has been identified through return-period analysis of six years of historical data. When the threshold is met, the Djibouti Red Crescent activates early actions including safe water provision, hygiene kit distribution, first aid, and psychosocial support along the transit corridor. Similarly, the Honduran Red Cross EAP, that, two years after its initial approval, needed a revision to reflect shifting dynamics in Central America movement flows following changes in US migration policy, uses a two-indicator trigger combining upstream movement data from Panama with an assessment of national response capacity. When both indicate rising volumes of movement and diminishing capacities, early actions are implemented at humanitarian service points along the migration corridor, focusing on WASH, health, psychosocial support, restoring family links, and protection referrals.

Approach C: At longer-term displacement or settlement sites

At longer-term displacement or settlement sites, early action shifts towards preventing the secondary deterioration of conditions for both displaced populations and host communities. In Colombia, for example, the sEAP for complex crisis in the Pacific region addresses this stage: it is activated when specific institutions issue alerts indicating that a mass displacement event linked to armed conflict has occurred or is imminent in one of the four target departments. Displaced communities typically arrive in larger towns or municipal capitals where they settle in temporary shelters that lack adequate infrastructure. The sEAP particularly targets the gap between the onset of displacement and the point at which local authorities can deliver the full response as mandated by national law, a period during which displaced people often have no access to clean water, health services, or psychosocial support. Early

actions include deploying water treatment capacity and storage, distributing hygiene kits, providing physical and psychological first aid, broadcasting radio messages on safe behavior in the presence of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance, establishing child-friendly spaces, and conducting community workshops on gender-based violence prevention. Critically, the protocol also targets host communities in receiving municipalities to mitigate tensions that might arise when capacities and local services are strained by a (sudden) increase of the local population.

Across all three stages, a degree of predictability is essential for anticipatory action to function. Anticipatory action for population movement does not aim to forecast movement itself with the same precision that is possible in case of weather-related extreme events. Yet, it does require sufficient evidence, that can, for example, be drawn from historical patterns, trend data or scenario analysis, to identify when peaks in movement or arrivals are likely to exceed existing capacities. The underlying logic is that displacement-related needs often follow recognizable patterns: movement along established corridors tends to fluctuate, and past events provide a basis for identifying thresholds beyond which available services and response capacity are overwhelmed and conditions begin to deteriorate. It is this predictive element that distinguishes anticipatory action from response. In contexts where no such patterns can be identified and displacement-related impacts cannot be modelled or anticipated with any reasonable confidence, an EAP may not be the appropriate instrument; other mechanisms such as the imminent DREF or response DREF may be better suited to address the crisis.

Where sufficient data and / or patterns do exist, the design of triggers and thresholds is a central operational challenge. The s/EAPs that have been approved illustrate different approaches to trigger design: The Djibouti sEAP, for instance, relies on quantitative flow monitoring data with a statistically derived threshold; Honduras combines upstream movement data with a structured capacity assessment and consensus-based expert judgement; and Colombia draws on official institutional alerts linked to department-level displacement thresholds. The IFRC guidance further distinguishes between single-phase triggers, which initiate action once a predefined threshold is reached, and multi-phase triggers, which enable an initial low-regret activation followed by more targeted actions once field confirmation is available. In all cases, triggers should be linked not only to movement volumes but also to indicators of humanitarian severity, such as rising unmet health or protection needs, reduced access to essential services, or strain on host community resources to ensure that activation reflects deteriorating conditions rather than movement alone.