

How coordination between the Red Cross Red Crescent and the World Food Programme in Bangladesh set the stage for scaling-up



Anticipatory action in Bangladesh

In 2015, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), the German Red Cross (GRC), the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre (RCCC), and the World Food Programme (WFP) began working together to establish forecast-based financing (FbF) systems in Bangladesh. This made Bangladesh one of the first countries to pilot anticipatory humanitarian action. The organizations elected to work on floods (BDRCS and partners also began work on cyclones) because these affect nearly 80% of the population and account for a significant proportion of the deaths and economic damage caused by disasters in the country (Massella and Sarker, 2018).

WFP began by focusing on pre-positioning and logistics, and eventually shifted to implementing forecast-based early actions in specific communities in Kurigram. BDRCS, with support from GRC, the Swiss Red Cross and the American Red Cross, began by engaging individual communities to identify early actions and develop community-specific triggers. Later, in keeping with new Red Cross Red Crescent financing mechanisms (**Forecast-based Action by the DREF**)¹, BDRCS shifted to developing national Early Action Protocols that can be activated wherever impact-based flood or cyclone forecasts indicate the impact will be the greatest.

Despite these differences in approach, BDRCS, GRC and WFP were working on FbF for flooding and soon recognized the potential of collaboration to increase learning, to expand the reach and impact of FbF, and to avoid duplication. In October 2018, WFP, BDRCS and GRC, as well as the Swiss Red Cross, the American Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) country office in Bangladesh, signed an Agreement of Cooperation. In this, all parties recognized that “close cooperation, collaboration, and coordination” in the development and testing of various elements of FbF “will enhance the early actions and the humanitarian service provided to affected populations” (AoC, 2018; p.1, point E).



BDRCS simulating an evacuation. © BDRCS/GRC

Three years later, in 2021, Bangladesh has one of the most established track records in FbF and has become a global frontrunner in the realm of anticipatory humanitarian action. Because of collaboration and joint advocacy on the part of WFP and BDRCS, in 2019 the Government of Bangladesh included FbF in its **Standing Orders on Disaster** ² (SOD) – the document that outlines roles, responsibilities and guiding principles for disaster management and humanitarian actors in the country. An FbF Task Force, established through the SOD, held its first meeting in March 2021 and continued to work on FbF strategy throughout 2021. It will ensure continued collaboration among government and non-government actors, and the development of a common framework for anticipatory action in the country.

This briefing captures the lessons from a study conducted in mid-2020 to capture the lessons from the fruitful interorganizational collaboration that took place in Bangladesh from 2015-20. Practitioners around the world can learn from this experience.¹ These lessons are based on a review of project documents and interviews with nine key informants working on FbF in Bangladesh from BDRCS, WFP, GRC, Care Bangladesh and the government.² The results highlight successes and lessons learned from the collaboration between WFP, BDRCS and a growing list of humanitarian actors interested in anticipation.

¹ Most interviews took place in 2020, but publication was delayed; therefore, the content was updated to reflect key developments in 2021.

² Informants were told their identities and contributions would remain anonymous to encourage candid participation.



Build on each other's strengths: synergies in programme set-up, design and advocacy

Collaboration allowed each organization to focus on areas of FbF in which they have a comparative advantage and skills, while also benefiting from their partner's strengths. Areas of collaboration included: joint trigger development; shared anticipatory actions; and collaborative advocacy. Through this sharing of research, lessons and advocacy strategies, WFP, BDRCS and other organizations reduced the investment required to develop anticipatory systems and policies. They were also able to streamline efforts to mainstream anticipation at the national level.

Joint trigger development

From the outset, the design of FbF triggers³ and the selection of early actions was a key area of collaboration between WFP, BDRCS, RCCC and GRC. As BDRCS began working on flood triggers before WFP, WFP employed the climate advisor from RCCC when it began to explore community-level implementation for floods in 2018. This allowed them to build on existing data, expertise and experience for triggering flood early action. As a result, both organizations adopted the same flood trigger.

This collaboration and agreement on triggers had at least two advantages. First, trigger development often requires extensive data collection and processing. Consequently, it is one of the most technical and resource-intensive elements of establishing an FbF programme. Because WFP and BDRCS used the same analysis and thresholds, **there was no need to duplicate this extensive analysis**. Secondly, agreement on activation thresholds establishes **clear expectations for partner organizations and beneficiaries as to when anticipatory assistance will be provided**. In this way, it facilitates communication with recipients and coordination among partners upon activation.

Shared anticipatory actions

Likewise, because both organizations sought to address floods, they were able to share ideas and experience regarding early actions. When WFP began exploring cash-based interventions, it "didn't have to reinvent the wheel because **GRC did quite a lot of research to come up with the triggers, to come up with the early actions** product that WFP could use" (KII 01).⁴ As a result of BDRCS' research and experience with community-level early action, WFP was able to quickly consolidate their own action plan (Massella and Sarker, 2018). BDRCS and WFP originally distributed different amounts of cash, but because

of knowledge-sharing they realized that **distributing the same cash value would minimize potential confusion or resentment** among beneficiaries in different communities. The Food Security Cluster, led by WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), organized a study on expenditure patterns by poor households over the year and came up with an average minimum monthly expense of 4,500-6,000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT; approximately US\$53-70). Based upon the recommendations of a 2018 study led by Bangladesh's Cash Working Group, which has extensive experience in working on cash in the country, BDRCS and WFP agreed to provide beneficiaries with 4,500 BDT. This is roughly equivalent to what a family spends on food in two to three weeks (WFP, 2021 [↗](#)) during a crisis.

Collaborative advocacy for building FbF systems

Through collaboration, BDRCS and WFP drew on each other's strengths to move anticipatory action forward. WFP built upon expertise and experience within the Red Cross Red Crescent when it came to triggers and cash distributions; in working with WFP, BDRCS was able "to speed up [its] advocacy activities with the government" (KII 05). As a member of the United Nations (UN), WFP had stronger relationships with and access to relevant officials within the government. **WFP – in close coordination with BDRCS – therefore took the lead on advocacy for anticipation**, allowing for a cohesive and effective push for anticipation. As a representative from a non-governmental organization explained, "the work that was done previously by WFP, BDRCS, and GRC really set the stage for Care and other newer actors to come into FbF" (KII 07). Building on this bilateral advocacy and learning, WFP and BDRCS jointly launched a Technical Working Group for FbF in 2019, which now includes stakeholders from over 20 humanitarian organizations working on anticipation in Bangladesh (KII 03, 05, 06). This group serves to increase the visibility of FbF beyond these two organizations, to share data, and to spread learning and knowledge-sharing beyond the original partnership.

By taking a common approach to FbF advocacy, stakeholders avoided confusion by ensuring that all partners working on FbF in Bangladesh approached the government with one voice. All the informants interviewed for this study agreed that WFP-led joint advocacy was essential in convincing the government to include anticipatory action in the SOD, which was a significant milestone toward embedding FbF within national disaster-management systems. As a representative from Care International summarized, "for the government to have forecast-based action in the Standing Orders on Disaster is a huge achievement, and not one that needs to be taken lightly at all, and that has to do with the push from WFP and the rest of us" (KII 07). Inclusion in the SOD confers FbF with official legal recognition from the government, "and it's because of the collaborative efforts in terms of advocacy and engagement with the government, through WFP, BDRCS, and GRC, that it has been possible" (KII 01). Further promoting FbF, BDRCS, GRC and WFP – with support from the Government of Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management

³ Triggers in an Early Action Protocol are the thresholds for a particular hazard that will release the financing and set the actions under way.

⁴ Numbers after quotations indicate the key informant number.

and Relief and the Department of Disaster Management, CARE Bangladesh and the Start Fund Bangladesh – organized a National Dialogue Platform on FbF in September 2019 (BDRCS, 2019). This provided the opportunity to share experiences, explore possibilities for scaling up, identify funding opportunities, and develop a roadmap for the future of FbF in Bangladesh.

The **strong relationship between WFP and BDRCS** set the stage for scaling up anticipatory action in Bangladesh. A government official described FbF pilots conducted by BDRCS and WFP as “a model in anticipatory action in Bangladesh”, not only laying the groundwork for the inclusion in the National Plan on Disaster Management and the SOD, but also for the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) pilot in 2020 (KII 09). Building on WFP’s and BDRCS’s previous experience with early action, WFP and other UN agencies, such as UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and FAO, used CERF anticipatory action funds to reach approximately 220,000 beneficiaries with a variety of anticipatory actions during floods in July 2020 ([Seppo, 2020](#)) .

Make the most of differences

Whereas WFP and BDRCS were able to easily align their triggers, early actions and advocacy efforts, in other areas, such as beneficiary selection procedures and delivery systems, each organization harnesses its own strengths and respects internal mandates and procedures in order to meet beneficiary needs. Targeting many vulnerable households at short notice is one of the challenges of FbF, and WFP and BDRCS have chosen different beneficiary-selection procedures due to different modes of operation. WFP used historical flood data to identify and pre-select five flood-prone districts (Kurigram, Jamalpur, Gaibandha, Bogra and Sirajganj) and to pre-register all the potential FbF beneficiaries in those areas before engaging WFP’s cooperating partners in the field. Using predetermined lists of vulnerable households enables WFP to verify and reach vulnerable households quickly in any of those districts, based on the forecast. By contrast, BDRCS has a national-level protocol, activating it wherever the forecast and previous risk assessments indicate impacts will be highest. It also relies on its extensive network of volunteers to target and verify beneficiaries based on the forecast and current conditions, rather than relying on pre-selected lists. To prevent the same beneficiaries from being selected twice, whenever BDRCS activates in one of the five WFP-selected districts, staff “collaborate with WFP ... to avoid the duplication when selecting the beneficiaries” (KII 05).

Differences in beneficiary selection procedures also influence the choice of financial providers and the speed with which funds are dispersed. As WFP has a pre-established list of potential beneficiaries across five districts, it can work with bKash, one of Bangladesh’s largest financial service providers, which has ‘cash-out’ agents in every village. Because WFP pre-selects beneficiaries during the preparedness phase, it can have their financial details ready and transfer the funds very quickly upon activation.



A man and his grandson stand on a raft made from a banana tree, in front of his submerged house. © WFP/Sayed Asif Mahmud

By contrast, the BDRCS does not select beneficiaries in advance, and it uses the Post Office for cash transfers. The Post Office has the advantage of having less cumbersome approval processes for cash recipients and is therefore available to those who might not have the necessary documentation for bKash. Recipients may also withdraw the funds from any Post Office branch, which are widely distributed throughout communities. However, it may take beneficiaries longer to receive the funds, which can be problematic given the short lead time for floods. Each mode has strengths and weaknesses and has generated its own lessons. This contributes to the overall pool of knowledge and experience within Bangladesh, from which other actors can draw.



Room for differentiation

The interviews conducted for the study also highlighted that successful collaboration does not require anticipatory systems to be implemented jointly at every phase. WFP and BDRCS have different mandates, so while the two organizations harmonized their beneficiary selection criteria to meet both organizations’ objectives, WFP necessarily focuses on impacts related to food security and BDRCS on saving lives and broader humanitarian impacts. Although there is coordination around triggering and beneficiary selection to prevent duplication, WFP and BDRCS do not collaborate extensively during the activation of FbF protocols or during monitoring and evaluation. As explained by one informant, “once activated, then [both organizations] implement in silos. I would say [WFP] has their own areas to implement. [BDRCS] has our own. They have their own approach. We do have our own approach” (KII 01).

Likewise, the organizations have different approaches to monitoring and evaluation, and conduct these activities separately. WFP can do baseline, outcome and impact studies, whereas BDRCS, as part of the Red Cross, must rely on comparison communities because it does not know where it will activate in advance. However, “once the implementation phase is over, then we start exchanging again, like the opportunity to learn from each other” (KII 01). Collaboration before and after activations allows WFP and BDRCS to concentrate on their own mandates during humanitarian crises, while continuing to share and learn from each other. Furthermore, FbF is scaled up through this collaboration.



Key takeaway messages

As a result of these complementary initiatives and efforts to reduce duplication, more people benefit from early actions. During the 2020 flood season, for example, WFP reached approximately 145,000 people ([WFP, 2021](#)) and BDRCS 16,400 ([IFRC, 2020](#)) with anticipatory actions.

The findings described in this briefing lead to several key conclusions and lessons that may be relevant to practitioners in other contexts.

Share data, resources, and strategies to capitalize on each organizations' strengths. Collaboration reduces the overall investment required to establish effective systems, prevents duplication, and enables early actions to be scaled up and reach more beneficiaries. Collaboration around data procurement and trigger development may be particularly beneficial, as these are technical, resource-intensive processes. Furthermore, aligning thresholds, harmonizing activities (e.g., agreeing on the value of cash transfers) and coordinating around beneficiary selection all help to streamline activation and prevent disputes or confusion among beneficiaries during or after activations.

Coordinate advocacy efforts to speak with one voice. The most frequently cited achievement was establishing anticipatory action in the SOD. These same organizations are now helping the government to develop a single overarching framework for anticipation in Bangladesh. These successes were universally attributed to an advocacy strategy that was led by a single organization with close ties to the government. Although other organizations were involved in advocacy, WFP remained the primary government contact for FbF, reducing the potential for confused or mixed messaging.

Facilitate continuous learning, coordination and exchange. In addition to joint advocacy, coordination mechanisms (e.g., the FbF Technical Working Group) and opportunities to learn (e.g., the National Dialogue Platform in 2019) can be effective ways to build relationships and create a cohesive movement around anticipation.

Allow for diversity for maximum impact. This experience shows that, despite working for and within a common framework, organizations do not need to collaborate on or align every aspect of their anticipatory systems to obtain successful outcomes. Within the shift toward anticipation, there is room for difference and experimentation. A variety of strategies and foci can be complementary and help bring benefits to more people.

Works cited

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For more information about anticipatory action, please visit the [Anticipation Hub](#).

You can learn more about anticipatory action in Bangladesh on the [Anticipation Hub's global map](#).

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