



# ANTICIPATING DISPLACEMENT IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

## INSIGHTS FROM AFFECTED CONTEXTS ACROSS AFRICA, THE MIDDLE EAST, AND ASIA

### INTRODUCTION

Anticipatory Humanitarian Action for Displacement (AHEAD) is a multi-country initiative that aims to reduce the escalation of humanitarian needs associated with conflict-induced displacement by strengthening the evidence base, systems, and practice of anticipatory action for displacement (AA). Implemented by the Danish Refugee Council and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AHEAD combines in-country pilots with learning, analysis, and advocacy to generate evidence on what works and what does not, and to support the uptake of effective, conflict-sensitive AA approaches by governments, humanitarian organisations, and donors.

The Integrated Context Analysis (ICA) was undertaken to inform the design of AHEAD interventions across selected locations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Rather than providing comprehensive conflict analyses for each context, the assessment focuses on how conflict-related risks translate into displacement, how early warning currently function in displacement settings, and where opportunities and constraints exist for anticipatory action. The analysis places particular emphasis on early warning systems, access to hard-to-reach areas, and the role of communities and diaspora in anticipating and responding to displacement risks. Findings are based on qualitative data collection carried out in 13 assessed locations across Burkina Faso, Niger, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Yemen, and Myanmar, including focus group discussions and key informant interviews with displaced and host communities, local authorities, civil society actors, humanitarian practitioners, and diaspora representatives. This primary data was complemented

by secondary analysis and validation discussions to situate local perspectives within broader conflict, displacement, and humanitarian dynamics. The analysis prioritises community-level experiences and perceptions, with the aim of grounding anticipatory approaches in how risks are understood, anticipated, and navigated by affected populations.

This report presents a synthesised global analysis of the ICA findings, drawing out cross-cutting patterns and key variations that shape the feasibility and design of anticipatory action for displacement across different conflict environments. It complements a more detailed internal analysis used to inform AHEAD design, while providing a concise, comparative perspective to support learning, dialogue, and decision-making on anticipatory approaches to conflict-induced displacement.

### BACKGROUND: CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND DISPLACEMENT

Across the assessed contexts, conflict-related displacement is shaped by **recurrent and often foreseeable patterns of insecurity**, rather than isolated or purely unexpected shocks. However, the drivers and expressions of these patterns vary across settings, with important implications for how displacement unfolds and how anticipatory approaches might be designed. In several of the examined contexts, violence is cyclical and locally rooted, linked to competition over land, resources, or social and political authority. This is evident for assessed communities in **Ethiopia and South Sudan**, where intercommunal and inter-clan tensions follow recognisable cycles of escalation and retaliation, and where communities describe anticipating periods of heightened risk based on

prior experience, seasonal factors, or social triggers. In contrast, in the areas focused on communities in **Yemen and Myanmar**, insecurity is shaped more strongly by fluctuating frontlines, militarisation, and territorial control, with escalation often sudden and spatially uneven. While the timing of violence in these settings is less predictable, communities still identify observable warning signs, such as troop movements, shelling patterns, or checkpoint changes.

The resulting displacement across these locations is frequently **recurrent, short-distance, and often preemptive**, though the degree of choice and agency involved varies. In assessed locations in the **Sahel**, including **Burkina Faso and Niger**, households often move ahead of anticipated violence or intimidation, seeking temporary refuge with host communities or in nearby locations before returning when conditions stabilise. Elsewhere, particularly in frontline or highly militarised settings, displacement is more reactive, driven by sudden violence, eviction, or shifts in control, leaving limited scope for advance preparation. Displacement dynamics also include cross-border movements into neighbouring countries, such as **Uganda**, where the assessment focused on reception contexts linked to displacement from **South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo**.

Humanitarian needs are shaped not only by the intensity of violence, but by this **accumulation of disruption over time**. In pastoral and rural livelihood contexts, such as sampled locations in **Ethiopia and South Sudan**, loss of livestock, restricted mobility, and reduced access to grazing land compound across displacement episodes. In more urban or peri-urban settings, including the communities in **Yemen and Myanmar**, housing insecurity, rising rents, and housing, land, and property disputes increasingly constrain displacement options and prolong vulnerability. Across countries, women, children, and other at-risk groups are consistently identified as bearing a disproportionate share of the impacts of repeated displacement.

Looking ahead, surveyed communities expressed limited confidence in sustained improvements in security, though expectations differ by context. In areas affected by long-standing intercommunal tensions, respondents anticipate continued cycles of escalation and relative calm, often linked to seasonal or social factors. In settings shaped by active conflict lines or heavy militarisation, insecurity is expected to remain volatile and unpredictable, with displacement driven by sudden shifts rather than gradual deterioration. Despite these differences, a common expectation is that **displacement will remain a recurring feature**, underscoring the importance of approaches that engage earlier with emerging risks.

## **STATUS OF ANTICIPATORY ACTION FOR DISPLACEMENT EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS**

Across the assessed contexts, early warning systems related to conflict-induced displacement are **predominantly informal, fragmented, and weakly connected to decision-making and response mechanisms**. While communities frequently identify and monitor early signs of escalating risk, these signals rarely translate into coordinated anticipatory action beyond household or community-level coping strategies.

For most of these communities, conflict-related early warning relies on **community-based and informal networks**, including traditional leaders, religious actors, local committees, civil society organisations, and interpersonal communication channels such as word of mouth, mobile phones, and messaging applications. This pattern is evident across diverse contexts, where communities described relying primarily on locally trusted actors and informal communication to anticipate violence and potential displacement. These mechanisms can disseminate information rapidly, but they typically lack agreed thresholds, documentation, or institutional linkages that would enable warnings to trigger preparedness or anticipatory response at scale.

Formal early warning structures do exist in several contexts, but they are generally oriented towards **climatic, food security, or livelihood risks**, with limited integration of conflict or displacement indicators. This disconnect was highlighted in the assessed communities in **Ethiopia and the Sahel**, where formal systems were described as focusing on environmental shocks, while conflict-related risks perceived by communities remained outside official early warning frameworks. As a result, risks that communities consider foreseeable often fail to prompt early engagement by humanitarian or government actors.

The functionality of early warning systems is further shaped by **access constraints and insecurity**. In hard-to-reach or highly insecure settings, such as the communities surveyed in **South Sudan, Yemen, and Myanmar**, communication disruptions, and fear of retaliation restrict information flow and reduce lead time. In some cases, early warning capacity is effectively absent due to active conflict or proximity to frontlines, leaving communities reliant on last-minute alerts or direct observation of violence.

Overall, the analysis shows a persistent gap between **local awareness of displacement risk** and the ability of existing early warning systems to support anticipatory action in practice. While early warning information often exists at community level across the assessed locations, it remains largely disconnected from preparedness planning, anticipatory financing, and coordinated response, limiting its contribution to displacement-focused anticipatory action.

## ANTICIPATORY ACTION IN PRACTICE

Across the assessed contexts, anticipatory action for conflict-induced displacement remains **limited, fragmented, and largely informal**, despite widespread recognition that displacement risks are often foreseeable. Where anticipatory practices do exist, they are primarily undertaken by households and communities themselves, rather than embedded within coordinated humanitarian or government-led systems.

In many sampled locations, communities described engaging in **informal anticipatory behaviours** when early signs of escalating risk emerge. These include pre-emptive movement, temporary relocation of family members or assets, adjustments to livelihood activities, and reliance on social networks for temporary shelter or support. Such practices were reported across diverse contexts, including sampled locations in **Burkina Faso, Niger, Ethiopia, and South Sudan**, reflecting local knowledge of recurring displacement risk.

Formal anticipatory action mechanisms linked specifically to displacement are largely absent across the assessed locations. **Where anticipatory mechanisms do exist, they are more commonly designed for climatic or livelihood-related shocks**, with limited application to conflict-related displacement risks. As a result, early warning information related to conflict and insecurity rarely translates into anticipatory financing, or agreed response packages, and humanitarian engagement with displacement remains predominantly reactive, activating only after violence has escalated and population movement has already occurred.

Overall, the analysis finds a persistent gap between **early awareness of displacement risk** and the capacity to act in advance in a coordinated and protective manner. This gap underscores both the relevance of anticipatory action for displacement and the need for approaches that are context- and conflict-sensitive, and grounded in existing community practices, rather than assuming the direct transferability of anticipatory models developed primarily for climatic or other hazard types.

## HARD-TO-REACH (H2R) AND ACCESS CONSTRAINTS

Across the assessed contexts, access constraints are a **central factor shaping displacement dynamics and limiting the feasibility of anticipatory action**. Many of the locations most exposed to conflict-induced displacement are also those where humanitarian access is most restricted, creating a persistent gap between early awareness of risk and the ability to act in advance.

In several sampled locations, access constraints are driven by **active insecurity, presence of armed actors, and risks to humanitarian personnel**, resulting in partial or complete suspension of operations. This pattern was evident in sampled locations in **South Sudan, Yemen, and Myanmar**, where fighting, frontline

proximity, militarisation, and movement restrictions significantly constrain humanitarian presence. In such settings, earlier anticipatory engagement is often not possible beyond remote support or community-led coping strategies, even when displacement risks are well understood.

In other contexts, access is constrained less by active fighting and more by **administrative, logistical, and infrastructural barriers**. In sampled locations in the **Sahel**, including **Burkina Faso and Niger**, insecurity along roads, checkpoints, fuel shortages, administrative restrictions, and limitations on cash delivery mechanisms restrict the reach, timing, and predictability of humanitarian assistance. These constraints affect both reactive response and the potential for anticipatory action, particularly in rural and peripheral areas where displacement risks are high.

Access challenges also interact with displacement patterns themselves. Recurrent and short-distance displacement often occurs outside formal displacement sites, with households moving between villages, host communities, or temporary shelters. This mobility complicates identification, registration, and targeting, particularly in hard-to-reach areas where humanitarian presence is intermittent. As a result, displacement-affected populations may remain largely invisible to formal systems until needs have already escalated.

Overall, the ICA findings underscore that **hard-to-reach conditions are not an exception but a defining feature** of many displacement-affected contexts. These constraints significantly limit the ability to operationalise anticipatory action for displacement, even where early warning information exists. Addressing access barriers, including through conflict-sensitive approaches and partnerships that enable engagement in insecure and remote areas, is therefore critical to expanding the scope and effectiveness of anticipatory action.

## THE ROLE OF DIASPORA

Across the assessed contexts, diaspora actors play a **meaningful but largely informal role** in supporting displacement-affected populations, primarily through financial assistance, information sharing, and social support. Their engagement is generally reactive and family-based, rather than structured around collective preparedness or anticipatory action frameworks.

In several contexts, diaspora support was identified as an important coping mechanism during periods of heightened insecurity and displacement. This was evident in sampled locations in **Burkina Faso, Niger, Ethiopia, and South Sudan**, where remittances help households meet basic needs, facilitate temporary movement, or recover after displacement episodes. In **receiving contexts such as Uganda**, refugee and diaspora networks maintain close links

with communities in countries of origin, shaping information flows and support during displacement episodes linked to conflict in **South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo**.

However, the role of diaspora actors in **anticipating displacement risks** remains limited. Across contexts, diaspora engagement is typically informal, fragmented, and driven by personal or clan-based ties, with little coordination across networks or linkage to humanitarian early warning or anticipatory action systems. In highly insecure or access-constrained settings, such as in **Yemen and Myanmar**, diaspora engagement was described as particularly constrained, reflecting communication barriers, surveillance, and limited scope for organised support.

Despite these limitations, the analysis suggests that diaspora actors represent a **potentially underutilised resource** for anticipatory action for displacement. Their proximity to affected communities, ability to mobilise resources quickly, and access to information across borders position them as relevant actors in early awareness and preparedness. However, realising this potential would require careful, context-sensitive engagement to address issues of trust, coordination, and risk, and to avoid exacerbating existing tensions or exposure to harm.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND PROGRAMMING**

The analysis points to a set of implications that extend beyond individual contexts and programmes, with relevance for **governments, humanitarian organisations, donors, and other actors engaged in anticipatory action and displacement response**. Across diverse conflict environments, displacement risks are often foreseeable, yet existing systems remain oriented towards reacting after movement has occurred. This highlights a need to broaden how anticipatory action is conceptualised and operationalised in displacement settings.

From a **policy perspective**, the findings underscore the importance of recognising conflict-induced displacement as a domain where anticipatory approaches are both relevant and necessary. While anticipatory action frameworks have expanded in recent years, they

remain more strongly associated with climatic shocks. Integrating conflict-related displacement risks into anticipatory policy frameworks requires greater acceptance of uncertainty, attention to political and protection sensitivities, and investment in conflict-aware early warning that reflects how communities experience and anticipate risk.

In terms of **practice**, the analysis highlights opportunities to build on existing community-level anticipatory behaviours rather than attempting to replace them. Informal early warning, pre-emptive movement, and reliance on social networks already shape how households manage displacement risk, particularly in insecure and hard-to-reach settings. Supporting these practices through earlier, more predictable assistance, adapted targeting approaches, and flexible response options could help reduce harm and preserve dignity, even where full anticipatory systems are not feasible.

For **programming and financing**, the findings point to the need for greater flexibility in how anticipatory action is designed and resourced in conflict settings. Access constraints, fragmented early warning, and recurrent short-distance displacement can place pressure on anticipatory approaches that rely on highly standardised triggers, clear lead times, and stable operating environments. This highlights the value of exploring and learning from approaches that allow for more incremental and locally grounded anticipatory engagement, including in settings where access is constrained or displacement unfolds in non-linear ways.

Within this broader landscape, AHEAD is using the ICA findings to inform the design of **in-country interventions** that test how anticipatory action for displacement can be adapted to different conflict and access contexts. These pilots are intended to generate practical evidence on early warning, anticipatory decision-making, and response options, and to identify what is feasible, appropriate, and effective in practice. Learning from these pilots, alongside the comparative insights from the ICA, will be used to support dialogue and learning, contributing to wider efforts to strengthen anticipatory approaches to conflict-induced displacement and to reduce reliance on reactive humanitarian response over time.

<sup>1</sup> Data collection was conducted in the following locations: Dédougou (Bankui Region) and Toma (Sourou Region; formerly Boucle du Mouhoun) in Burkina Faso; Téra and Torodi in Niger; Liban Zone in Ethiopia; Akobo and Pibor counties in South Sudan; Imvepi and Rhino refugee settlements in West Nile, Uganda; Al Khawkhah and Hays districts in Yemen; and Momauk and Waingmaw townships in Kachin State, Myanmar. These locations correspond to priority areas for the design of AHEAD interventions.