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# Anticipatory Action in Refugee and IDP Camps: Challenges, Opportunities, and Considerations



# Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Displacement and Anticipatory Action</i>	4
<i>Paper Overview</i>	4
<b>Camp characteristics, origins, current context</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Case Study: IDP Camps in Northwest Syria</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Disaster events and impacts in Syria</i>	6
<i>State of AA in Syria</i>	7
<b>Case Study: Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Disaster events and impacts in Cox's Bazar</i>	9
<b>Discussion:</b>	
<b>Considerations when designing anticipatory actions in refugee and IDP camps</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>12</b>

# Introduction

How do disasters affect people in situations of displacement, and in particular how might the humanitarian system better anticipate and respond to climate disasters impacting displaced people? In the last decade, the number of climate disasters and people displaced by conflict has risen globally, illustrating a pressing need to better understand how *already displaced* people are impacted by climate disasters.

Today, there are over 82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including at least 26.4 million refugees and 4.1 million asylum seekers (UNHCR 2022a). Although the drivers of displacement are increasingly intertwined, often including a combination of conflict, climate change, poverty, and food insecurity (UNHCR 2021), in 2020 at least 55 million people were displaced internally by climate disasters (IDMC 2021a). Of the global total of forcibly displaced people, nearly half of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 20% of the world's refugees live in camps.

Strikingly, although camps are generally considered to be short-term solutions, people are displaced on average for many years, with some estimates being as high as between 10 and 26 years (Ferris 2018). Despite this knowledge, camps often lack long-term strategic planning and are instead better equipped to respond to urgent needs in emergency contexts. While perhaps useful at the beginning of displacement, this approach has been criticized for limiting displaced people's autonomy and capabilities and impeding their ability to establish independent lives through education, employment, and other opportunities (Smith 2004).

The short-term focus of humanitarian assistance in camps, including decisions made early in a response, can also lead to negative consequences later on, such as limited risk reduction and preparedness in the face of climate hazards and disasters. Important factors influencing the impacts of climate related disasters include where a refugee or IDP camp is located, how it is designed, including its accessibility during extreme weather events; the availability of resources in a given area where a camp is located, including the potential of tension or hostility with local inhabitants; their impacts on the environment around them; the durability of housing and infrastructure in camps, which are often constructed as temporary and are therefore not equipped to withstand extreme weather; and, very importantly, the different conditions of vulnerability that people affected by conflict living in a camp can experience, ranging from mental health challenges, trauma, the disruption of social networks, and separation of family members, all of which can limit displaced people's capacity to withstand the impacts of climate-related hazards.

## ***Displacement and Anticipatory Action***

Given these factors and the vulnerability of many displaced people, the compounding effects of climate and conflict, as well as responses to displacement, are important to explore in relation to humanitarian assistance for climate hazards and disasters. There is a particular gap in research on how anticipatory action, a newer form of humanitarian assistance that seeks to respond to disasters *before* they occur, could be implemented in refugee and IDP camps.

Anticipatory action, commonly known as forecast-based financing within the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, takes place in the often short window of time between weather forecasting and a climate event. These short-term interventions can reduce vulnerability before a disaster, increase preparation for disaster response, and have positive long-term impacts (Coughlan de Perez *et al.* 2015). Today over 50 countries are developing anticipatory action systems, although very few focus on camp settings.

However, research shows that displaced people are more likely to be secondarily displaced by disasters than those who have never been displaced (UNHCR 2015). This is attributed in part to the hazard-prone location of many refugee and IDP camps and urban areas where displaced people settle, as well as more individual factors such as displaced people having limited assets and social networks. Indeed, the scale of secondary displacement is so high that the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) has begun, for example, measuring 'displacements' to account for this (IDMC 2021b). The risk of secondary displacement as well as the supposedly temporary nature and corresponding impermanent infrastructure of many camps for displaced people highlight the value of further exploring the potential for anticipatory action for displaced people (Wagner, M and Jaime, C 2020).

## ***Paper Overview***

The following sections of this paper present two case studies of displacement which highlight particular challenges and opportunities for anticipatory action that are also relevant for other displacement contexts. The first case study explores camps for internally displaced Syrians near Aleppo and Idlib, specifically the Dana sub-district of camps, in the northwest region of Syria. The second case study focuses on Cox's Bazar in southeast Bangladesh, home to nearly a million Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar. An overview of historical disaster events and their impacts is provided followed by an exploration of anticipatory actions that could be developed in these contexts. The report concludes with key considerations and potential next steps in developing anticipatory action interventions in displacement contexts.

## Camp characteristics, origins, current context

### Case Study: IDP Camps in Northwest Syria

In Northwest Syria over 1.7 million displaced people live in temporary and informal settlements and IDP camps, with 83% of camp residents living in densely populated areas with insufficient infrastructure (Shelter Cluster 2021). Despite rainwater flooding posing an increasing and significant risk, for example, three-quarters of IDP sites lack rainwater drainage infrastructure, leaving IDPs vulnerable to flooding (ibid.) In other months, however, these same sites lack fresh drinking water due to drought, illustrating the multivarious effects of climate change and the importance of addressing climate shocks in camps.

One IDP-hosting area in Northwest Syria is the Dana sub-district of Idlib governorate, which is home to the highest number of IDPs in the country of any governorate. The Dana sub-district is home to more IDPs in camps than any other in the country, with over 800,000 Syrian IDPs living across 575 camps within 26 clusters (OCHA 2021).

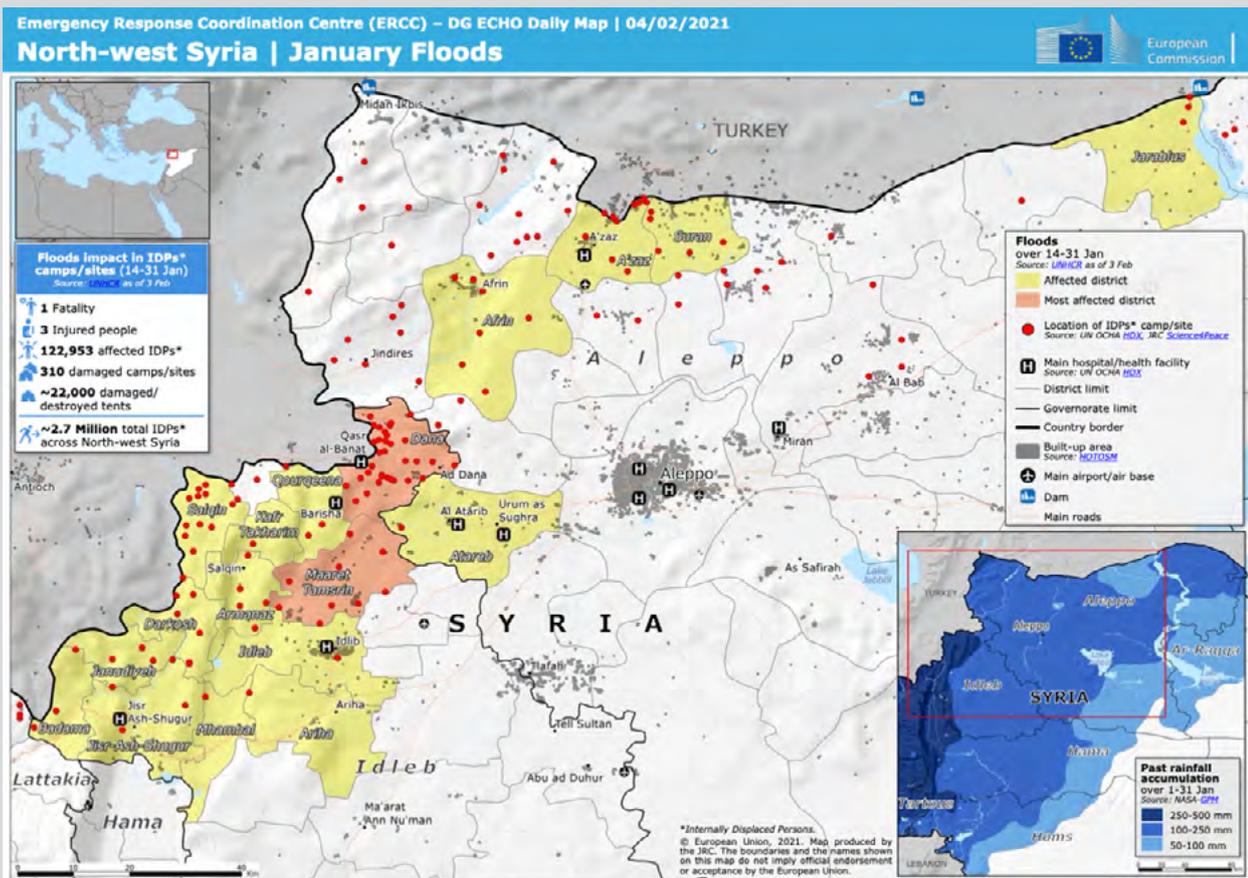
This translates to approximately 145,000 households living in these camps, some of which have been occupied since the start of the conflict in 2011. In Idlib governorate 88% of IDP shelter sites are unplanned self-settled camps (ibid.). Today, the Dana sub-district hosts the highest percentage of IDPs and returnees over the general population (85%) of any sub-district in the country. Over 860,000 IDPs are estimated to reside in the Dana sub-district (ibid.).

In the Dana sub-district alone (see map below), the IDP population increased from 617,000 to 845,000 between November 2019 and August 2020 following an uptick in violence in Northern Syria (REACH *et al.* 2021). The Dana sub-district has experienced repeat flooding events on several occasions since 2016 (ibid.). Representative of many other sites in the region, inadequate shelter is a critical issue in Idlib. Across the governorate, 60% of IDPs live in less than adequate housing, with 30% living in tents. Most of these shelters cannot withstand severe weather and are prone to flooding and collapse (ibid.).



## Disaster events and impacts in Syria

Between January 14 and 31 2021, heavy rains caused widespread flooding in northwestern Syria in the Dana subdistrict of Idlib. Over 122,000 IDPs across more than 300 camps in the area were affected. More than 8,400 shelters were destroyed, with another 13,800 sustaining some level of damage (REACH *et al.* 2021a). Thousands of households were forced to seek shelter in schools, mosques, and open spaces. Nearly 120 schools were damaged in the floods. One child was killed from a shelter collapse and three others were injured (Southern Turkey Education Cluster 2021). Below is a map showing the affected areas and IDP camp sites from January 2021.



Source: ECHO 2021

The map shows that while there was widespread flooding across Idlib and Aleppo governorates, the most affected districts were Dana and Maaret Tamsrin. This was not the first event of its kind in the region. Flooding in the area has been a recurring problem with similar events taking place in the period 2016-2020. In November 2016, camps in Dana were flooded impacting accessways and causing destruction to tents and property. In December 2018 a severe storm severely damaged tents and property in over 60 camps in Idlib and Aleppo. This was followed in March 2019 with heavy rainfall causing flash flooding, damaging roads, hospitals and schools and impacting over 20 camps. In June 2020 heavy rainfall, again caused flash flooding reportedly resulting in the loss of three lives and affecting 54 camps in Idlib. Around 1,285 families were forced to leave their tents and a further 1,000 families currently living in damaged tents (REACH, 2021). Critical disaster impacts in camps included the destruction of tents, and damage of personal assets and food. These impacts represented a critical humanitarian situation, as people's capacities to withstand the winter conditions were severely debilitated. This is a recurrent challenge in camps with similar conditions across the region. These flood events affect people living both in and outside of IDP camps in northwest Syria. However, those living in camps are at greater risk, and have generally suffered more severe impacts for several reasons. First, IDPs frequently live on land that is closer to or within areas that are prone to flooding. Secondly, overcrowded conditions limit

movement from flooded areas and inadequate shelters like tents are not made to withstand extreme weather. Poor sanitation infrastructure can lead to health problems after such an event has taken place. This was the case in January 2021, when the Dana sub-district saw a higher incidence of water-borne diseases compared to the months before and after. IDP camps in other regions of the world, such as the Bentiu IDP camp in South Sudan, face similar incidences of water-borne diseases due to a combination of intense flooding and inadequate WASH (MSF 2021).

### **State of AA in Syria**

In Northwest Syria, recurrent winter storms have damaged infrastructure and shelters for several consecutive years. Idlib and Aleppo are the hardest hit governorates, with the Dana sub-district and surroundings suffering the most severe impacts. As of yet, there are no country-wide anticipatory action protocols in place, and no such program targeted to IDP populations in the region of Northwest Syria. Given the high density of IDPs living in the Dana sub-district and its surroundings, anticipatory action measures could have the potential to greatly reduce the impact of recurring storms and flooding in the area.

From the weather forecasting perspective, a recent study shows the evidence that the 2019 flood event induced by heavy rainfall was predicted with a 70% probability with a lead-time of 3 days and 50% with a lead-time of 7 days (Jaime *forthcoming*). This positive ability to forecast such extreme weather events well raises questions of how humanitarian agencies and communities might have been able to use this information to reduce the impacts of nearly 235,000 people – or could make use of them in the future.

The REACH Initiative has also led the way in collecting and analyzing data related to the recurring flooding events in Northwest Syria as well as their impacts on IDPs and infrastructure. Along with UNITAR, they have conducted analyses on flood risk in the Northwest region of Syria with in-depth flood risk assessments on the Dana sub-district using hydrological modeling and satellite imagery (REACH *et al* 2021a, 2021b). They found that 85% of the locations surveyed identified access to adequate shelter as a top priority, in part due to climate hazards. 5,724 IDP shelters in North Dana, 1,644 IDP shelters in West Dana, and 4,957 IDP shelters in South Dana are exposed to flash flooding, illustrating the high level of need for climate-smart, durable shelter in the region. The death that was reported during the 2021 flooding, for example, occurred due to a shelter collapse.

Information such as that collected by REACH is extremely useful in determining what kinds of anticipatory actions may be feasible as well as identifying longer-term disaster risk reduction (DRR) measures in particular areas. Given that the flood extent and shelters at risk are known, risk reduction measures could be taken, for example, by permanently relocating shelters away from the main flooding areas. In the medium term, further research on infrastructure and topography could also be useful, such as identifying areas of camps in need of better drainage systems to avoid deep water flows through the camps.

Just as longer-term DRR must be implemented, short term anticipatory actions could play a crucial role in minimizing climate disaster impacts. With the proper advance information, actions could include a cash-based intervention along with temporary relocation to shelters, bringing food and assets to higher grounds, protecting camp surroundings with temporary gabion or sandbags walls, identifying and bringing highly vulnerable people to suitable accommodation, protecting water sources from flood water through water drums, and so on. One of the enabling factors for these types of actions is the existing presence of humanitarian actors in camps, who with proper funding and resources can conduct readiness and early action planning and then interventions themselves in advance of an extreme weather event or in areas known to be hazard-prone. Implementing anticipatory action is particularly important in contexts where camp inhabitants are unable to leave camps before an extreme weather event due to factors such as lack of transport, funds, or legal regulations.

## Case Study: Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Today, three quarters of the Rohingya population live outside of their native Myanmar, with 90% of those displaced by the armed conflict living in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh has focused on disaster management in its five-year development plans, but in its most recent plan included very little on refugees beyond expressing its desire for their repatriation (Development Initiatives 2022). Refugee responses in Bangladesh are challenging, as refugees have few rights and very limited freedom of movement, which add to refugees' existing vulnerabilities from having fled conflict and systematic

violence in Myanmar. The severe damage to the lives and wellbeing of refugees from this context of violence and persecution, including mental and physical health challenges (Riley *et al.* 2017, Joarder *et al.* 2020) increases refugees' susceptibility to being severely impacted mentally by climate-related hazards (Cianconi *et al.* 2020). At the same time, persecuted and conflict-affected populations like the Rohingya may fare worse in climate disasters even if early warnings or anticipation actions are available due to past traumatic experiences. Their ability to trust information provided by governments or other sources of authority might be reduced, for example, or anticipatory actions meant to assist may in fact exacerbate feelings of loss of control or retrigger trauma, such as evacuation to a new site. Taking these possibilities into account is important for the development of anticipatory action for any trauma-affected populations.

In Bangladesh, the Government's restrictive stance towards refugees is coupled with a largely hands-off approach to assistance. Upon arrival to Cox's Bazar, it has often been refugees' responsibility to install their own shelter on deforested land within severely overcrowded settlements. Many of those whom arrived during 2017 had to settle in new makeshift sites due to overcrowding in

pre-existing camps. These new sites had no pre-existing infrastructure which made access to health facilities and other services difficult. Most shelters are constructed of bamboo and tarpaulin sheeting, and are frequently damaged during the rainy seasons, illustrating a key consideration for anticipatory action.

At the same time, Cox's Bazar and other camps are sites of large amounts of international humanitarian assistance, with the 2021 Bangladesh Rohingya Refugee Crisis Joint Response Plan receiving almost 675 million USD for a wide range of projects implemented by different organisations (FTS 2022). While few projects appear to focus on anticipatory action in particular, the prevalence of actors ranging from UN bodies to donor government agencies increases opportunities for meaningful anticipatory action to take place through existing humanitarian infrastructure.



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## ***Disaster events and impacts in Cox's Bazar***

Cox's Bazar is home to the largest refugee settlement in the world, with 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in an area of 26km<sup>2</sup>. As of January 2022, over half (52.5%) of Rohingya in Bangladesh were under the age of 18, with almost 40% 11 years old or younger (UNHCR 2022b). Most of the refugees arrived with a massive influx occurring in 2017, but nearly 250,000 Rohingya were already settled in Cox's Bazar before then. The largest settlement in Cox's Bazar is the Kutupalong Balukhali expansion site, home to over 620,000 Rohingya refugees. The area has also experienced repeated flooding and storm events since 2017.

The refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar have experienced recurring natural disasters since large numbers of Rohingya refugees arrived in 2017. Every year since then, monsoon season has affected thousands of residents living in the Cox's Bazar settlements. In the 2021 season, 30 of the 34 camps in Cox's Bazar were affected by flooding (Islam 2021). Like many refugee camps around the world, these camps were created in challenging physical environments that increase their susceptibility to climate disasters. The camps are built on hilly terrain, increasing the frequency of landslides and further amplifying the effects of flooding. State of AA in Cox's Bazar

On a country level, Bangladesh has been recognized as a worldwide leader in EWEA while also being one of the most vulnerable countries to disasters in the world according to the INFORM index (DRKMC 2022). It has significantly reduced its number of fatalities from rapid and slow-onset disasters since the 1970s, achieved in part through development and social welfare investments (Sammonds *et al.* 2021). Multiple anticipatory action interventions have been taken in Bangladesh by actors such as the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Red Cross Red Crescent, and World Food Programme in response to a variety of hazards including flooding, heatwaves, and cyclones (Anticipation Hub 2022).

The vulnerability of refugee camps to disasters in Bangladesh was made evident in 2017 when Cyclone Mora passed through Chittagong and Cox's Bazar, which led to the development of natural disaster and cyclone preparedness programmes in the camps. The Bangladesh Red Cross National Society played a key role in this; as one country representative explained, 'Over the next two years [after 2017] we increased the trainings so that now all 34 camp systems have a formal early warning system. 3,400 refugee volunteers are responsible for giving early warning, early action in response to cyclones.' (Interview, July 2020)

Cox's Bazar has also been the site of significant actions taken in the realm of more general disaster risk reduction. For example, actions have been taken to combat the extreme deforestation that has occurred in the camp areas. Extreme overcrowding has led to clear-cutting the forest areas of the camps to make space for more shelters and to use the wood as fuel for cooking. In 2018, UNHCR and IOM began distributing LPG fuel and appropriate stoves which has now become the main source of cooking fuel for all camp residents. It is estimated that the LPG fuel programme prevents the extraction of 533,000 tons of firewood per year from the hillsides of Cox's Bazar (IUCN/UNHCR 2019). This programme also includes a reforestation component to restore the hillsides to a state of mixed vegetation as part of the 2019 Camp Greening Strategy, which also contributes to increased environmental resilience to flooding (*ibid.*).

However, given the recurring impacts of seasonal flooding in Cox's Bazar, it is clear that more could and should be done. In 2021, over 11,000 shelters were damaged or destroyed due to flooding, displacing 24,000 residents in the camps. A joint IOM and Reach assessment carried out in September 2021 found that a large percentages of shelters did not meet the minimum standards when assessed against criteria such as adequate drainage, sufficient bracing and spacing of bamboo rafters and columns, and integrity of roof fixtures. When considering future anticipatory actions for Cox's Bazar, shelter considerations, as in many other refugee camps, should be a top priority.

## Discussion: Considerations when designing anticipatory actions in refugee and IDP camps

The case studies above present several key considerations when designing AA in refugee and IDP camps. These include:

- **Freedom of movement:** Many refugees and in cases IDPs face legal restrictions on their right to freedom of movement, meaning that they are often confined to camps or are not legally recognised as inhabitants in urban areas. When designing AA in refugee camps in particular, it is important to understand whether displaced people will be able to leave the camp if needed when selecting an appropriate action. If leaving a camp for higher ground during a flooding event, for example, is not possible, then more emphasis may need to be placed on flood-proofing existing infrastructure in advance, or carefully selecting the safest areas in a camp for evacuation shelters.
- **Characteristics of camp populations:** More than half of the world's refugees are women and children, and female single-headed households often make up a large percentage of refugees camp inhabitants. Understanding characteristics of camp populations is imperative to deciding how displaced people can best be helped. For example, children and elderly people are likely less able to travel long distances by foot to access assistance such as community cooling or cyclone shelters. Carefully selecting locations with these types of characteristics in mind is important for enabling as successful a response as possible.
- **Short-term infrastructure and long-term displacement:** As illustrated in the case studies above, decent shelter is a key concern in many camps, compounded by the long-term nature of many displacement situations. Due to a variety of factors including government restrictions and a lack of resources, many shelters and types of infrastructures in camps are ill-equipped for extreme weather events. This in turn has significant impacts on people's access to safe shelter, drinking water, and other rights. Given the prevalence of temporary infrastructure in camps, reinforcing shelter and infrastructure should likely be a core component of many camp-based AA responses.
- **Accessibility of humanitarian actors to displaced people camps:** Similar to all AA interventions, humanitarian access is key. However, many camps for displaced people are in remote parts of countries with roads that may be impassable during an extreme weather event. While some camps are so-called 'humanitarian hubs', AA interventions must be carefully designed with supply chain access in mind. This may mean storing supplies in nearby warehouses far in advance of a season where extreme events are likely, and relying as much as possible on local supply chains.

- **Making use of existing humanitarian responses:** In contrast to many other places, refugee and IDP camps often have significant amount of humanitarian resources and a large humanitarian presence. While it is clear that the needs of displaced people often out-match existing resources, it is important to consider how existing humanitarian responses could be capitalized on to either constitute, contribute to, or follow anticipatory action interventions. This may mean adjusting the timing of existing humanitarian assistance distributions to occur at a key moment before an extreme weather event, or engaging in dialogue with humanitarian actors to ensure that interventions are not duplicated and can instead build on and strengthen each other.
- **The importance of trauma-informed anticipatory action:** It is well-documented that people who have experienced trauma due to conflict or other crisis may have traumatic flashbacks as part of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mistrust authority figures, have anxiety or panic attacks that can hinder cognition as well as movement, and experience depression that can affect decision-making (Shepherd & Wild 2014, Szabo *et al.* 2017). Outcomes and symptoms of trauma such as these all have the potential to make refugees and IDPs less likely to heed early warnings, take early action, or otherwise engage in anticipatory action. Developing trauma-informed AA for conflict-affected populations is a critical next step in extending anticipatory action to encamped populations.

## Conclusion

Climate hazards and forcible displacement, due to conflict and natural hazards, are both disturbing global trends that are set to continue. Given this, it is likely that the level of humanitarian need will only increase. It is crucial for the humanitarian system to better anticipate and respond to climate disasters impacting displaced people, including those living in camps. Identifying and bringing together actors with expertise on climate forecasting, anticipatory action, camp management, emergency shelter and the specific needs of displaced populations – including displaced people themselves – are important next steps for developing appropriate anticipatory action interventions for refugees and IDPs living in camps.

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The findings and conclusions in this brief are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, the IFRC or its National Societies.



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