

Interview with Dr Michael Köhler, Grand Bargain Ambassador



> 1. In February 2024, the Grand Bargain launched the Caucus on Scaling up Anticipatory Action. As Grand Bargain Ambassador, what was your vision in launching the Caucus on Scaling up Anticipatory Action, and how do you see it transforming the landscape of humanitarian aid?

Anticipatory Action (AA) is not new, but despite being increasingly discussed it is not yet very widespread. In 2023 data shows that only [0.2% of humanitarian funding goes into AA](#) — for which we also need to take into consideration the definition of AA.

As in every aspect of life, it is better to prevent than to cure, and therefore, it makes sense to promote AA to intervene faster, help resilience-building, and reduce the needs and costs at a moment in which the funding gap is going through the roof. Therefore, we thought it was essential to give AA a push. In June 2023, the 67 signatories of the Grand Bargain 3.0 (GB) agreed that AA should be one of the core issues that the GB should be working on. At the moment, it is clear that AA holds a big promise, but at the same time, it encounters many problems such as making financing available or addressing coordination needs. Consequently, the GB will try to figure out how to promote AA in a more efficient way, which is why the decision to launch a specific caucus on scaling up AA was taken in February 2024.

Since the inception of the GB process in February this year, there has been thankfully a lot of dynamism, with many States and organisations willing to contribute. This shows a strong interest in AA as a means to overcome some of the problems of humanitarian aid. What is clear is that AA would not just be a new instrument of humanitarian aid implementation. Taking AA seriously means performing a paradigm shift — a different way of organising and providing aid —, moving from the traditional role of responding to crisis to a mode that foresees crises. For this change to happen, we would need a different humanitarian aid approach that would include different forms of aid funding, the practical reliance both on performing foresight tools and increasingly also on local knowledge, sound logistics policies as well as a much improved and intensified cooperation with development, climate action, and peacebuilding efforts.

The added value of the GB in this context is not to develop the concept as such but to create a bigger group of supporters for AA, defining the conditions and harnessing

the political will to go all the way from the incumbent response towards the hoped-for future AA-based paradigm of humanitarian aid implementation. Currently, the GB is the only structure where you can find every category of humanitarian stakeholder, from the biggest donors to local NGOs, and therefore the GB is the appropriate forum to frame and push for this approach.

> 2. Securing funding commitments to enhance coordinated Anticipatory Action stands as a pivotal goal for effectiveness. Could you elaborate on the specific challenges in achieving this and the strategies being employed to overcome them?

On the one hand, there is the eternal problem known to everyone who works in humanitarian aid: given the general scarcity of funding, you always want to first and foremost save the life that is at risk. And there is the dilemma: every euro or dollar that goes into prevention or AA is money that is not allocated to the person who is already suffering from hunger, needs protection, or is having a health issue. Our entire sector is focused on responding to crises rather than anticipating and preventing them. This characterises our financial system. Problems here are not only the general lack of funding but often enough also the rigidity of financial instruments.

There are additional difficulties. When humanitarian funding goes into AA, spending can become more difficult to track, and often it does not appear as clearly in statistics as in direct crisis response. Spending might appear, for example, in the development or the environment statistics rather than in the humanitarian tracking lists. In the case of the EU, much of what effectively constitutes AA is categorised under civil protection, or at least involves the activation of civil protection instruments, which complicates tracking efforts.

As far as local organisations are concerned, we see that despite being key to implementing any form of humanitarian aid, they hardly ever benefit from AA spending; they look very much cut off from funding streams in general. This is simply because so far they have not yet become part of this new game. A problem that has to be overcome.

However, there is also a more general challenge. Over the last year and a half, I noticed time and again that while everybody speaks about AA, the understanding of what it really signifies, and what not, seems to be quite different. Not everybody is very clear about its meaning. Some

donors, including the European Union, have hardly made an extra-clear distinction between proper AA and, for example, disaster prevention, which is a very useful tool, but different from AA. Others, however, do so. Thus, there is a need to clarify and create a common base for discussion and taking commitments.

Lastly, AA has a communication problem. In general, it is more striking to talk, and report, about delivering aid to thousands of people in need than about bringing in supplies before a disaster strikes. In the extreme case, if through AA you lower a disaster's or a crisis' humanitarian impact—which is the main purpose of it in addition to shrinking the cost of operations—, then doing so does not hit the headlines as much as classic crisis response. There is therefore also a visibility issue, which must not be taken lightly since visibility is often enough key to our ability to mobilise resources, including for humanitarian aid and in particular when additional resources are needed to exceed initially programmed baseline amounts.

➤ 3. What is the importance of localisation and leadership by local actors in Anticipatory Action? How is this being pursued, and what benefits have you observed or anticipated from this approach?

All the reasons that speak in favour of a stronger localisation approach in classic humanitarian aid are even more relevant when it comes to AA.

We see that in all major crises, most of the action is being implemented by local partners as they are quite regularly being subcontracted by most of the bigger international implementing organisations. But beyond this fact, they know the local context, power structures, and decision-making needs. They can engage with the communities concerned, and they speak the local language, which makes them indispensable humanitarian actors.

When you intend to anticipate, it is obviously very important to understand the local context. You want to gain the confidence of local leaders so that they engage in foresight analysis and your foresight is based on correct data and meaningful assumptions. Additionally, a sound local basis will help to make sure that solutions are produced sustainably.

Therefore, it is a particularly delicate and regrettable fact that so far local organisations are hardly involved in AA and often enough have no possibility of receiving direct funding.

We need solutions for this problem. This is one of the reasons why I am very happy that the NEAR Network is part of the caucus on scaling up AA. NEAR can bring in both local and national civil society actors from the Global South and, I hope and trust, provide examples of good practices that could be followed or scaled up. The process will not be simple, but both donors and implementing organisations need to completely rethink how

they work and bring in the local dimension.

More localisation would hopefully also produce another benefit: If we want to engage new donors, including some from the Global South, it is indispensable to establish humanitarian aid as a collective global duty serving a common public good. This is one argument that could encourage nations like Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Brazil, Mexico, or Türkiye to engage more in humanitarian aid funding and relevant coordination efforts. Such emerging donors, however, would very legitimately want to empower their own aid organisations and focus on local actors in the countries they want to work in. Consequently, there is not only a technical argument but also a political one that should make us aim for more localisation – at least as long as we want to keep the relevance of our sector to effectively address humanitarian crises in the future.

➤ 4. Drawing on your experience as the former Deputy Director General of DG ECHO, what are in your view the principal challenges DG ECHO faces in scaling up Anticipatory Action? What are your thoughts on how to tackle these challenges?

In many regards, DG ECHO has been a de facto leader of AA. For several years, DG ECHO has benefited from being allocated a specific budget line on disaster prevention. Even though not exclusively dedicated to AA, implementing such a –admittedly limited– fund has allowed DG ECHO to start early on with pursuing an approach that has been somewhat different from the classic response to disasters we are accustomed to seeing: acting before the disaster and financing action that would minimise possible disaster impact.

Furthermore, during the tenure of Commissioner Lenarčič, DG ECHO has developed specific logistic policies to rationalise operations and reduce costs. Today, DG ECHO has warehouses in five destinations around the world, from Panama to Kuala Lumpur, where they stock tents, blankets, water purification material, medicine, and other aid items for rapid deployment in the relevant target region. These developments mark already a very big step in the right direction for implementing AA more generally.

However, there are also challenges. For example, consequent AA implementation requires much stronger coordination with other forms of aid intervention. This has become more complicated at the EU level right now with EU development policies increasingly shifting towards the Global Gateway, which admitted is not focused on fragile countries where from a humanitarian point of view AA would be particularly useful and necessary.

Another issue to be addressed is that it would be necessary to invest much more in a system of operational and performing mechanisms that could trigger AA inter-

ventions – basically, something that would ring the alarm before a disaster strikes or a crisis gets acute and activate all the force, means, and capacity that the EU system has already in place. It would be the type of toolbox and methodology that would allow humanitarian actors to be on top of the curve. This stands in the way of developing a much stronger profile in AA.

Against this background, I am delighted to see that DG ECHO is supporting the new caucus on AA very assertively. I hope that the caucus will produce very concrete recommendations that can be then implemented to overcome these and other remaining challenges.

➤ 5. To scale up Anticipatory Action, engaging with a broad range of stakeholders is crucial. With your double hat, how can collaboration with the wider humanitarian, development, and climate sectors be enhanced to foster a unified approach towards Anticipatory Action?

In the context of the EU, but also in other aid systems, there is still quite some way to go in this regard. We need a functional Nexus in action. While I think that the bulk of work regarding the Nexus will always be in the humanitarian area, development cannot completely slip away from it. In my view, one of the most important bridges between both of them is in fact climate action. An important part of the European development budget has been earmarked to finance climate action, including adaptation and mitigation. And AA can be one of the tools in this regard.

As part of my role in the Grand Bargain set-up, I am also in charge of the Nexus work. One of my intentions is to bring together high-level decision-makers from both the development and humanitarian aid sectors. The aim is to facilitate a very honest discussion on the reasons why we do not see more Nexus work, despite significant developments in this regard over the last few years, and what it would require to dynamise Nexus cooperation.

Nobody can deny that we increasingly encounter fragile contexts worldwide. However, at the same time, we see two worrying trends. First, development work is generally reducing its engagement in many of these crises. And secondly, often enough even peacebuilders and mediators are leaving these contexts instead of dealing with fragility. This leaves humanitarian aid playing a central role in countries such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, and Syria – in some way, an even too central role. Despite the key role of humanitarian aid in these contexts, the bad news is that in such cases there is hardly sufficient focus on systemic improvements and longer-term solutions because this is neither the task nor the focus or strength, of humanitarian aid. Anticipatory Action, however, can only benefit and find better framework conditions where such improvements are being pushed, even if success may only be very partial.

It is important to ask donors and the EU how they plan to deal with fragility in the future. For humanitarian reasons but not only. What is clear is that if we do not deal with fragility, fragility will deal with us – in the form of terrorism, organised crime, destabilisation of societies and countries, forced displacement, war, and so on, as we have seen in many countries. Addressing this set of challenges necessitates building effective bridges within the Nexus framework, connecting different policy areas and available funding streams.

➤ 6. Looking ahead to the outcome document of the caucus to be presented at the Annual Meeting in October 2024, what key commitments or actions do you hope will be outlined?

The first outcome that we would like to see is an agreement on very concrete funding commitments. It could be in the form of a recommended amount of humanitarian aid to be used in the form of AA. Or it could be that some countries or donors would want to provide a fixed percentage for AA. Whatever the agreement will be, we would wish to set up a self-reporting and financial tracking system. Of course, in the coming years, we would then monitor to see who is working in the right direction according to the commitments made.

Secondly, we need reliable pathways for humanitarian organisations to improve their readiness to implement AA. The AA approach does not only need commitments by donors but also implementing partners need to show how they would implement AA and how they want to get organisationally ready in this context.

Thirdly, in terms of coordination, we need solid action that can be put in place and make the case for AA. It would be desirable to focus on two or three convincing cases that prove the effectiveness of AA and demonstrate how it helps lower the cost of humanitarian intervention. Such specific actions could then be taken as an example to be followed to improve coordination between the right sectors and actors.

Once we see more cases of best practices, I trust this will influence operationally the way players at various levels in the system operate. As soon as donors set up specific funds for AA, the implementing sector will follow. They will be motivated not only by the availability of funding but also by the increased effectiveness of these approaches. Therefore, I am not without hope that the Grand Bargain caucus on AA will lead to improvements sooner rather than later.

Once that happens, we could not only see emerging an additional tool, but such development might trigger a total rethink in the way humanitarian aid operates. Anticipatory Action is indeed very important in our effort to reform and make the entire sector fit for the future.

Interview conducted by Francesca Giubilo and Jaime Martín Farelo on 11 April 2024.