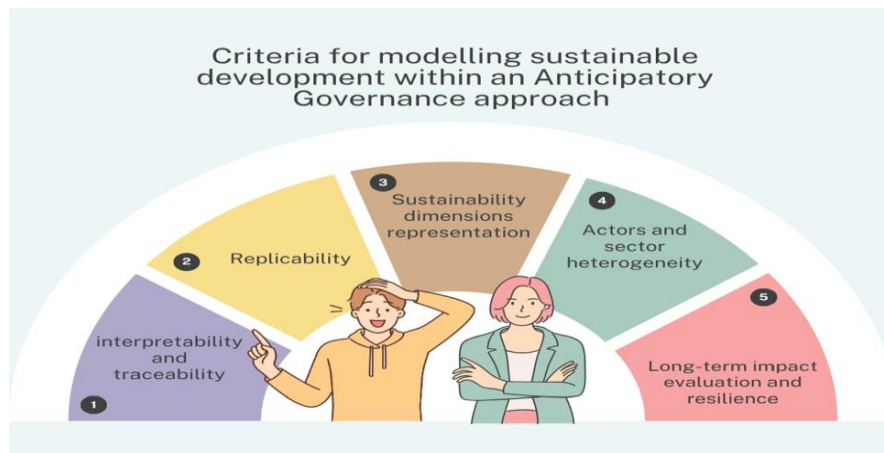


Anticipatory Governance: Policy-Making for Events That Have Not Yet Occurred

Mohosina Mostofa Mity¹

Introduction

Policy-making is often imagined as a response to events; something governments do after a crisis unfolds or a problem becomes too visible to ignore. But what if the real test of governance lies elsewhere? Increasingly, analysts and policymakers are asking a different question: can governments act before events happen, rather than after? This is where the idea of anticipatory governance begins to matter. Across global policy discussions, from climate change to emerging technologies, there is a growing recognition that many of today's most serious risks are not sudden. They build slowly, often in plain sight, and yet responses tend to come late. Reports and studies repeatedly show that governments are not short of warnings; what they struggle with is acting on them in time.



Source: Springer Nature

¹Mohosina Mostofa Mity is a Research Associate at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS & MSS in International Relations from the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

Anticipatory governance tries to bridge that gap. It is about using foresight, data, and scenario thinking to guide decisions in the present, even when the future remains uncertain. This does not mean predicting the future with precision. Rather, it means being prepared for a range of possibilities and building systems that can respond early, instead of scrambling later. At the same time, the idea raises difficult questions. How far should governments go in acting on risks that have not yet materialized? Who decides which future scenarios deserve attention? And can institutions that are often cautious and slow-moving really shift toward a more forward-looking approach?

These questions are becoming harder to ignore. In a world shaped by climate uncertainty, rapid technological change, and complex security challenges, waiting for events to unfold is no longer a neutral choice, rather it is a decision with consequences. Anticipatory governance, therefore, is not just a technical concept. It is an emerging way of thinking about responsibility, timing, and the role of the state in an uncertain world.

Why Governments Still Fail to Act on Known Risks

The gap between early warning and early action is one of the most consistent problems in policymaking. Governments today are not lacking information. In many cases, risks are identified well in advance, supported by data, expert reports, and even past experience. Yet, action is often delayed until the situation becomes urgent or unavoidable.

Take Bangladesh as an example. The country is widely recognized for its success in cyclone early warning systems. Over the years, improved forecasting, community awareness, and evacuation planning have significantly reduced death tolls during major storms. This shows that when warnings are taken seriously and linked to clear action, anticipatory governance can work. However, the same approach is not consistently applied in other areas. Urban flooding in cities like Dhaka continues to worsen, despite repeated warnings about poor drainage, unplanned urbanization, and climate risks. The knowledge exists, but action remains slow and fragmented.

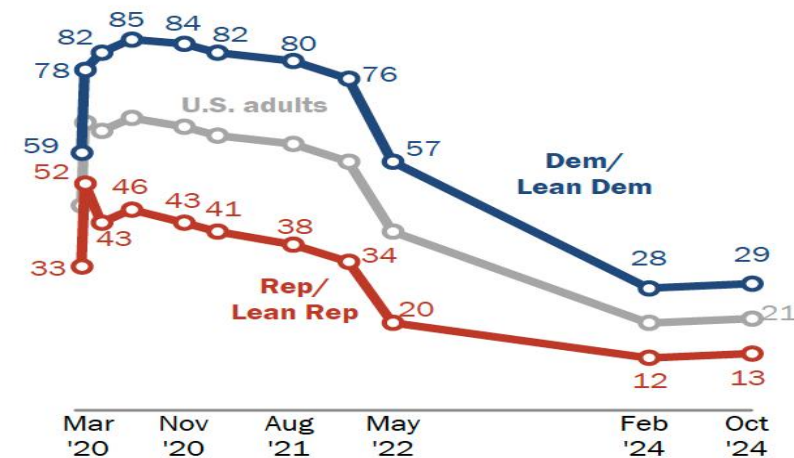
In the United States, the issue during COVID-19 was not a complete absence of preparedness, but a breakdown between existing warnings and timely action.² For years, pandemic risks had been

² "The U.S. Must Learn from COVID-19 to Prevent the next Disaster." 2020. Council on Foreign Relations. 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-reports/improving-pandemic-preparedness/findings>.

identified in national strategies, simulation exercises (like “Crimson Contagion” in 2019), and public health reports.³ Institutions such as the CDC had frameworks in place. However, early responses in 2020, such as scaling up testing, coordinating federal-state action, and communicating risk etc. were slower and more fragmented than what those prior warnings would have justified. Even in a system with strong forecasting capacity, early warnings did not translate into immediate, coordinated action.

21% of Americans still see COVID-19 as a major public health threat

% of U.S. adults who say the coronavirus today is a **major threat** to the health of the U.S. population as a whole



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or did not answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 21-27, 2024.

“5 Years Later: America Looks Back at the Impact of COVID-19”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

This gap often comes from political and institutional realities. Acting early usually requires spending resources, making difficult choices, and sometimes responding to risks that are not yet visible to the public. As a result, governments tend to prioritize immediate concerns over future

³ Marin, Carol, and Don Moseley. 2020. “‘Crimson Contagion 2019’ Simulation Warned of Pandemic Implications in US.” NBC Chicago. March 24, 2020. <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/crimson-contagion-2019-simulation-warned-of-pandemic-implications-in-us/2243832/>.

threats. The key question, then, is not whether governments can predict risks as they often can, but whether they are willing and able to act on those predictions in time.

Can States Make Policy Without Clear Evidence?

Governing under uncertainty means making decisions even when the evidence is incomplete or still evolving. This is becoming more common as governments deal with fast-moving risks like climate change, digital technology, and economic shocks. The challenge is not just technical. It is deeply political. Acting too early can seem unnecessary or costly, while acting too late can make the problem much harder to control.

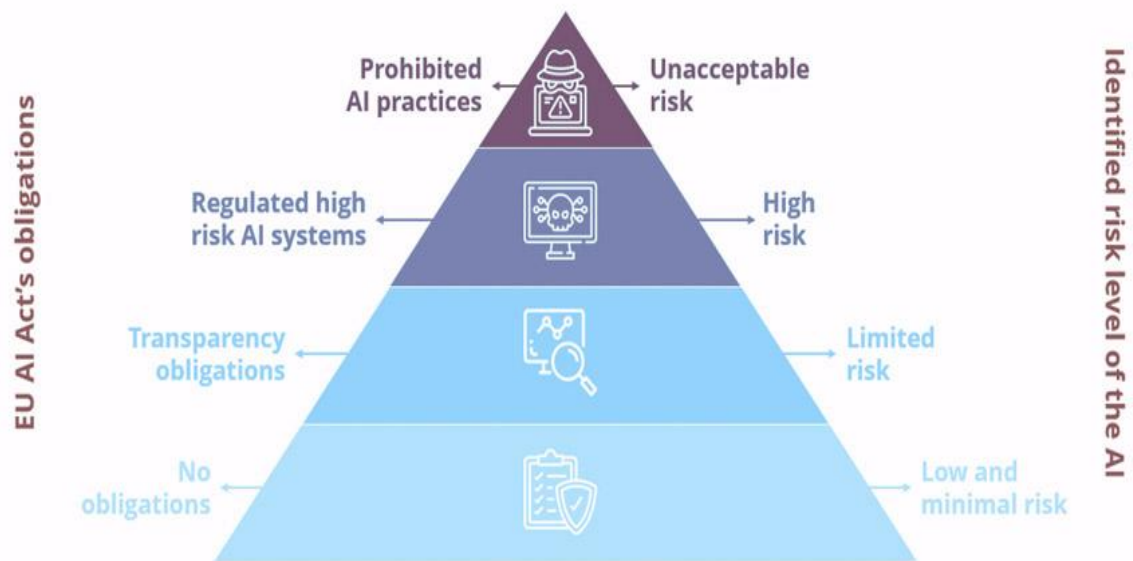
In Bangladesh, this dilemma is visible in how authorities respond to air pollution. Cities like Dhaka frequently rank among the most polluted in the world, and studies have long linked pollution to serious health risk.⁴ Yet policy responses often remain gradual and fragmented. One reason is uncertainty around how to balance economic activity such as construction and brick kilns with public health concerns. Even when the risks are known in general terms, policymakers hesitate to take stronger measures without precise data on economic trade-offs or immediate visible pressure.

A similar pattern can be seen in the European Union in its approach to regulating artificial intelligence. The EU moved early with its AI Act, trying to set rules before the technology fully matures.⁵ However, this early action has also been shaped by uncertainty. Policymakers are regulating systems whose long-term impacts are not fully understood, which has led to debates over whether the rules might slow innovation or fail to address future risks effectively.

⁴ IQAir Staff Writers. 2026. "February 2, 2026: Dhaka among Top 10 Most Polluted Cities in the World." @Airvisual. February 2, 2026. <https://www.iqair.com/newsroom/february-2-2026-dhaka-among-top-10-most-polluted-cities-in-the-world>.

⁵ European Union. 2025. "The EU Artificial Intelligence Act." The Artificial Intelligence Act. 2025. <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/>.

The EU AI Act employs a risk-based approach to regulate AI systems based on their level of risk



Source: Consultancy.eu

These examples show that uncertainty does not stop policymaking, it shapes it. Governments must often rely on partial knowledge, predictions, and assumptions. The real issue is how they manage that uncertainty. Some delay action in search of clearer evidence, while others move ahead and adjust later. In both cases, the decisions reflect not just data, but judgment, priorities, and risk tolerance.

Who Decides What Risks Matter?

The politics of the future is not only about identifying risks early, but also about deciding which risks are treated as important enough to act on. In practice, governments rarely respond to all warnings equally. Some future problems are acted upon quickly, while others remain in the background for years, even when evidence is available.

In Bangladesh, one clear example is river erosion and land displacement. Large parts of the country, especially along the Padma River and other major river systems, lose land every year due to erosion. Studies have long warned that this will increase with climate change and changing river flows. However, policy attention often focuses more on visible disasters like floods or urban crises, while erosion receives less sustained long-term planning. The problem is not lack of knowledge,

but the fact that erosion happens slowly and repeatedly, making it less politically visible. For affected communities, however, it is not a slow issue; it is a permanent loss of home, land, and livelihood.

A different version of this selective attention can be seen in India, particularly in its approach to heatwaves. Scientific studies have increasingly warned that extreme heat will become one of the most serious climate risks in South Asia.⁶ While India has developed heat action plans in several cities, implementation varies widely, and heat risks often compete with other political priorities such as economic growth and infrastructure development. As a result, responses remain uneven, even though the long-term threat is well established.

Anticipatory governance fails not only because of lack of foresight, but because foresight does not automatically create authority. In both cases, information exists, but it does not translate into unified action. Instead, decision-making becomes reactive, fragmented, and dependent on visible pressure. This shows a structural gap between knowing a future risk and building the political and institutional capacity to act on it before it becomes irreversible.

Technology as a Double-Edged Tool: AI, Data, and Predictive Governance

Artificial intelligence, big data systems, and predictive tools are now becoming central to how governments try to anticipate risks before they fully appear. These tools are often described as a way to make governance faster and more accurate. But in reality, they also create a new kind of challenge: governments are now surrounded by more information than ever before, yet decisions do not always become faster or better. The key issue is no longer lack of data, but how that data is interpreted, shared, and acted upon across institutions.

In Bangladesh, digital surveillance and AI-supported monitoring systems have expanded rapidly in recent years, especially in Dhaka. According to official and media reports, CCTV coverage has been expanded to over 90% of polling centers nationwide for election monitoring in 2025, showing

⁶ Thomson Reuters Foundation. 2021. "Climate Change Set to Drive More Deadly Heat in South Asia." Trust.org. 2021. <https://news.trust.org/item/20210325101206-w58qq>.

how deeply surveillance infrastructure is now embedded in governance systems.⁷ In parallel, Dhaka city continues to expand centralized surveillance networks, including thousands of cameras installed at major intersections and institutions for traffic and public safety monitoring. However, despite this expansion, a major structural issue remains: data flows have increased faster than institutional coordination capacity.

A key limitation is that surveillance systems generate large volumes of real-time information, but response mechanisms remain fragmented across agencies such as police units, city corporations, and traffic divisions. Even when incidents are detected through camera networks or control rooms, action often depends on manual coordination rather than automated or integrated response systems. This creates a gap between detection and intervention, where technology increases visibility but does not necessarily improve speed of governance response.

The core finding is that predictive governance does not eliminate uncertainty; it reorganizes it. Instead of uncertainty about what might happen, governments now face uncertainty about how to respond to what is predicted. Technology shifts the problem from lack of information to overload of information. When institutions are not aligned, data becomes abundant but action remains slow. So, the real challenge is not building smarter systems, but building governance structures that can absorb predictions and still make timely, coordinated, and accountable decisions.

Anticipatory Governance in Fragile and Developing States: Limits and Possibilities

Anticipatory governance becomes more complicated in fragile and developing states because the gap between what is known and what can be done is much wider. These countries often have information about future risks, but limited administrative capacity, uneven institutions, and political pressures make early action difficult. So, the challenge is not only forecasting the future, but also building the ability to respond to it in time.

⁷ Staff Correspondent. 2026. "CCTV Coverage at over 90pc of Polling Centres Now: EC." Prothomalo. Prothom Alo English. February 10, 2026. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/d6lkezb9u9>.

In Bangladesh, one clear example is public health surveillance and disease preparedness beyond major disasters. The country has made progress in digital health reporting systems, and the Directorate General of Health Services now collects data from thousands of local facilities. However, gaps remain in early detection and rapid response capacity for emerging health risks. For example, Bangladesh has around 0.7 physicians per 1,000 people, which is below global averages.⁸ This limited workforce makes it harder to translate early warnings into quick, nationwide responses. Even when risks are identified at the local level, coordination between central and local health systems often slows action. The issue is not absence of data, but the difficulty of turning data into timely governance decisions.

A more recent illustration of this gap is visible in the ongoing measles outbreak reported in 2026 in Bangladesh, where early signals of rising infections were available through local reporting systems, but response measures such as vaccination drives and resource allocation were initially delayed and later scaled up under pressure.⁹ This shows a pattern where action is often triggered by escalation, not anticipation.

A similar pattern can be observed in South Africa, particularly in the management of violent crime and early warning policing systems. The country has developed advanced crime intelligence tools, including community reporting channels and centralized police databases through the South African Police Service (SAPS). However, despite these systems, response efficiency remains uneven. Official safety data shows that in many urban areas, less than 40% of reported serious crimes receive an on-site police response within the first hour, especially in high-density townships.¹⁰ This reflects a deeper structural issue: alerts are generated, but operational capacity to respond quickly is limited.

⁸ "Physicians (per 1,000 People) - Bangladesh | Data." n.d. Data.worldbank.org. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.PHYS.ZS?locations=BD>.

⁹ Goswami, Shreya. 2026. "100 Children Dead in Bangladesh Measles Outbreak: What Led to Sudden Surge?" [Www.ndtv.com](https://www.ndtv.com/health/100-children-dead-in-bangladesh-measles-outbreak-what-led-to-sudden-surge-11327246). NDTV. April 8, 2026. <https://www.ndtv.com/health/100-children-dead-in-bangladesh-measles-outbreak-what-led-to-sudden-surge-11327246>.

¹⁰ SAPS. 2023. "Services | SAPS (South African Police Service)." [Saps.gov.za](https://www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php). 2023. <https://www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php>.

Anticipatory governance in such contexts is not blocked by lack of knowledge, but by uneven state capacity. Fragile systems often operate in a constant state of partial readiness—aware of risks, but unable to respond at the same speed across all levels of government. This creates a structural imbalance where foresight exists, but execution is inconsistent. So, the real limitation is not imagination of the future, but governance bandwidth. At the same time, the possibility lies in strengthening institutions that connect early signals to coordinated action. Without this bridge, anticipatory governance remains more of a concept than a functioning system in many developing states.

Way Forward

Anticipatory governance can only work if it moves from being an idea about better forecasting to a practical system that connects foresight with fast and coordinated action. The first step forward is to treat anticipation not as a planning exercise inside government departments, but as a shared operating system across institutions. Many countries collect large amounts of data and produce risk assessments, but these remain separated from decision-making. A more useful approach would be to create “decision bridges” that automatically link early warning signals to pre-agreed policy responses. For example, instead of waiting for political approval during a crisis, governments could design response triggers in advance, where certain risk thresholds automatically activate funding, personnel deployment, or inter-agency coordination. This reduces delay without removing accountability.

A second innovation is to move from static forecasting to “living policy models.” Most policy plans are written as fixed documents, but risks today evolve quickly. Governments could develop continuously updating policy frameworks where simulations, AI models, and real-time data constantly revise risk priorities. This would allow institutions to adjust before crises fully unfold, rather than revising plans after the fact.

A third direction is to redesign institutional incentives. In many systems, officials are rewarded for avoiding mistakes rather than preventing future risks. Anticipatory governance requires the

opposite: rewarding early action even when outcomes are uncertain. This could include performance systems that value prevention success, not just crisis management success.

For Bangladesh, the priority is to strengthen the link between national-level data systems and local-level response capacity. One practical step would be to create district-level “anticipation cells” that combine health, disaster, and urban data into a single decision unit. These cells should not only collect information but also have limited emergency authority to act within predefined boundaries. At the same time, Bangladesh could invest in mobile-based micro-response systems where frontline workers can trigger rapid interventions directly through digital platforms without waiting for layered approvals. This is especially important given the country’s low physician density and uneven institutional coverage. Also, Bangladesh could benefit from building “failure memory systems,” where past delayed responses are systematically studied and turned into automatic policy corrections. Instead of treating failures as isolated events, they should become structured inputs for improving future anticipation.