

agency news

Africa crisis exaggerated, says evaluation

Some of Britain's leading international charities who tried to help southern Africa avoid a food crisis in 2002–3 overstated the seriousness of the situation to the public, according to an independent evaluation of the year-long emergency. The 12 charities, which together raised more than £16m from the public, and spent millions more official aid from government, saved lives and eased suffering, says the report by consultants Valid International for the Disasters Emergency Committee. But together they made many mistakes, including not fully appreciating the links between the food crisis and HIV/Aids. (For further analysis of the 'complex' drought in Southern Africa, see article by Sarah Moss in this issue.)

One of the problems with the Southern Africa Crisis Appeal for Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique was that it was the first time British charities had tried to avoid a full-scale humanitarian crisis rather than respond to one. This led to a mixed response that was part traditional relief aid and part longer-term development help.

The complexity of the situation led to tensions between charities' marketing departments, which were trying to attract as much money as possible, and their programming departments working on the ground. Many agencies were strongly criticised for using misleading or emotive language and pictures to portray the crisis.

'The overall presentation of the crisis overstated the acute case,' the report said. 'The risk is that the agencies may lessen credibility in future cases where the risks are not overstated. Too little emphasis [was placed] on the chronic nature of the crisis.'

On the positive side, the evaluation found that the charities had learned quickly how to work on a bigger scale and co-ordinated their responses well. They were also found to have been sensitive to local cultures and to have supported local groups. In other emer-

gencies, similar evaluations have found charities seriously at fault.

Brendan Gormley, the director of the emergency committee, said: 'The purpose of the report was to learn how to address a complex crisis. The appeal was conceived to stop a whole region spiralling downwards and was remarkably successful.'

*John Vidal, The Guardian,
16 January 2004*

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/famine/story/0,12128,1124455,00.html>

Pakistan Water Gateway

Realizing the need for information and knowledge sharing for effective water resource management and decision making, IUCN – The World Conservation Union – set up a community of practice for the water sector of Pakistan in early 2003, Pakistan Water Gateway (PWG). Pakistan is the first country in the region to have such a portal and the Government of the Netherlands is supporting it financially. PWG is envisioned as a one-stop website for all water-related information relating to Pakistan on the internet: www.waterinfo.net.pk/

Communities of practice are groups that form to share what they know, and to learn from one another concerning a domain of knowledge, in this case water. PWG's community of practice is a group of people of diverse backgrounds using email and the internet to discuss water issues in Pakistan.

PWG already includes many of the following:

- Online forums.
- Online information broadcasting (e.g. a monthly newsletter covering recent happenings in the sector).
- A document management system, to which editorial staff can add content. Once data are added and categorized they will automatically appear on the website.
- Mailing/discussion lists. Generally mailing lists are more helpful than forums to promote discussions because of the ease of receiving email.

- Video conferencing.
- Access to research papers, archives, databases, knowledge bases, and case studies.
- Experts' directory – an interactive and operational profile database of Pakistani water experts and professionals.

Asad Uz Zaman, IUCN

Safe Water System introduced in eight countries

The Safe Water System (SWS) developed by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is being promoted and distributed by Population Services International (PSI) in eight developing countries: Zambia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Malawi, Madagascar, Kenya, India and Afghanistan. The SWS consists of three elements: a bottle of dilute sodium hypochlorite solution for point-of-use water disinfection, a home water-storage vessel and hygiene promotion. The SWS can be provided for a family of six for US\$0.01 or less. CDC field trials show a 44–85 per cent reduction in diarrhoea episodes when the SWS is used correctly.

According to a recent study in Uganda,¹ the use of the SWS can reduce the risk of diarrhoea in people with HIV/AIDS by 37 per cent. At the end of January 2004, the Environmental Health Program was starting research in Zambia to assess the level and use of the SWS by both low-income and higher-income households. PSI expects to launch safe water programmes in Burkina Faso and Haiti, and is also developing SWS products in Bolivia, Eritrea, Nigeria and Uzbekistan.

*Source Weekly, 26 January 2004;
<http://www.cdc.gov/safewater/>*

1 Lule, J.R., J. Mermin and S. Malamba, (2003) 'Effects of safe water and Cotrimoxazole on diarrhea among people with HIV', Paper presented at: 13th International Conference on AIDS & STIs in Africa, Nairobi, Kenya. http://www.icasafrica.org/ICASA_abstractbook.pdf