

Towards more effective drought management

HISTORICALLY, droughts in South Africa were seen as freak natural events, each separate from the other. Increasing understanding of the world's weather patterns, especially the El Nino phenomenon, tends to favour the view that certain regions of the world, Southern Africa included, are prone to drought, in a predictable, cyclical manner. The 1992/3 drought seems to confirm the view that drought is a recurrent, cyclical and endemic feature of Southern Africa.

Inherent weaknesses exposed

Drought, like other natural disasters, helps to strip away facades and exposes the fundamental issues and inherent weaknesses in a society. The poorest members of a community tend to suffer the most severe effects of natural disasters, as they live on the margin of subsistence and lack the reserves to cope with the serious disruption of disasters.

Southern Africa has experienced droughts consistently during this century. These droughts have been defined according to meteorological and agricultural definitions of drought. In the assessment of their impact and in the development of responses, the needs and problems of the marginalised communities have been ignored. Since 1921, farmers benefited from extensive relief measures. The motives



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for these assistance schemes were to mitigate the impact of droughts on the economy. Agricultural imperatives were highly regarded while the impact on the majority of South Africa's people remained economically unimportant.

The effect of drought on black communities must be seen in the context of institutional neglect which black communities have suffered, as a result of apartheid.

The problems created by the drought have heightened existing crises in the community, rooted in the underdevelopment and neglect to which these communities have been subjected. The implication is

that the most appropriate drought response would be development and poverty relief strategies and that these should emphasise community empowerment and capacity building.

The National Consultative Forum on Drought

The National Consultative Forum on Drought (NCFD), and its regional offshoots, offers a channel to address these issues coherently.

The NCFD was formed in June 1992, when 68 organisations came together to coordinate a response to the drought crisis in South Africa. The NCFD represents the broadest grouping of forces in the history of

drought response in South Africa. It set itself two objectives: to ensure that relief reaches the worst affected sectors and to promote the cause of the rural poor

The work of the NCFD relied upon the cooperation of all the forces participating. These forces ranged from the government to its political opponents.

The NCFD is proof of the inability of the South African government to fulfil its obligations to its people. The plight of the rural poor has been placed on the agenda of a drought management process for the first time. The NCFD's existence has promoted ideas for a future policy on handling droughts, especially in marginalised communities. Issues such as early warning systems, capacity building and poverty strategies have come from the NCFD process.

Future of the Forum

Recently, the NCFD reconsidered its future role. One of the options considered was to transform the NCFD into a broader rural forum. This would involve the NCFD operating in all rural areas of the country, not only drought prone ones. It would focus on poverty related issues and capacity building for emergency relief and broader development planning. This work would be through regional community-based structures and be linked to broader development initiatives.

It is AFRA's view that the NCFD has been a significant and relevant vehicle for drought relief and has contributed to the handling of drought as a social, rather than an agricultural and

economic, crisis. The NCFD should continue to exist and contribute to the development of a more appropriate drought management strategy. AFRA welcomes the NCFD view that drought issues are part of broader poverty related issues in the country. But we are concerned that, in its efforts to focus on poverty and rural development, generally, the issue of drought could be neglected. We believe that drought relief should remain the primary focus of the NCFD, as it is well-located to facilitate the development of an appropriate and relevant drought management strategy.

The emphasis on regional work within the NCFD is also useful. Differing regional dynamics need region-specific programmes and foci. Most significantly, however, local NGOs and CBOs can play more effective roles. Communities can, and should, be drawn into the process of drought management.

The regional formations of the NCFD should link to regional economic and development forums. These forums would have the responsibility of coordinating development initiatives at a regional level. Sub-structures to deal with rural issues should be established with all the relevant players. The Regional Consultative Forum on Drought (RCF) should locate itself, as a drought-specific rural coordinating structure, within broader rural formations under the relevant economic and development forums.

Community involvement in the RCF should be addressed as a priority. With broader forums, the RCF

should investigate ways to facilitate contact and networking locally and regionally. Information on conditions in communities should be collected to prioritise drought prone areas for relief work and to identify areas for capacity building programmes.

The capacity of the RCF, itself, should be improved. Personnel with specific responsibilities for water resource management, nutrition, job-creation, training, information and capacity building, should be employed. Fieldworkers should be employed and deployed at grassroots level to assist with information gathering, capacity building and networking.

The NCFD and the RCF should take responsibility for:

- drought relief during the current drought
- developing more appropriate longer term strategies

Communities will face the severest consequences of the present drought during the coming winter. There seems to be no clear commitments to a winter drought relief programme. The NCFD and RCF should concentrate efforts on lobbying for and setting up a programme for relief during winter. Food security, water supply, health and fodder should be addressed.

More appropriate strategies should be investigated at two levels:

- appropriate relief programmes and procedures
- broader drought management strategy

These strategies, where successful, have consisted of:

- preventive measures
- curative measures

Preventive Measures

These should include the following a permanent drought-specific forum, weather watch groups, water management, compensatory measures and fodder banks, among others.

A permanent drought-specific forum

This forum needs to take responsibility, at local, regional and national level, for monitoring and early warning, the development of appropriate technologies and approaches in agriculture and water management, training and education, capacity building and co-ordination of drought relief efforts. The structure should incorporate state, NGO and community structures. The present NCF is well positioned to develop into this kind of institution.

Weather watch groups

Specialised groups entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring weather patterns should be established at national and regional levels. These groups should monitor rainfall patterns and identify possible drought periods.

Water management

Extensive water management systems must be developed. These should include effective watershed management education, exploitation of ground water, availability of boring rigs and other equipment, water quality education and maintenance of water supply systems.

Compensatory measures

Improved food production in better rainfall areas should be promoted. A proportion of this increased production should be used to create buffer stocks. In drought-prone areas, whose soils are shallow and poor in natural productivity,

appropriate technological advances should be developed and experimented with.

Fodder banks

With fodder in drought periods a serious problem, increased fodder production in the course of normal agricultural activities should be encouraged.

Intercropping strategies should be experimented with, and agricultural products should include food, fodder and fuel. Fodder banks could be used to store adequate fodder for drought periods.

Other Preventive Strategies could include:

- soil conservation strategies
- health and nutrition strategies
- assistance to marginalised farmers
- afforestation strategies

Curative measures

Comprehensive and suitable relief programmes should be developed, with clear guidelines and objectives. Several lessons have been learnt, internationally, from actual involvement in relief programmes and research into the manner these have worked, including that:

1. Relief should be conducted within the context of development.
2. The process by which communities receive aid is more important than the actual aid received.
3. The community is able to actively participate in relief operations, and most times know more about how it should be done than do outsiders.
4. Relief programmes, if properly executed, can provide a strong stimulus for positive changes.

5. The role of relief agencies is to support activities that local organisations cannot carry out themselves.

6. Disaster aid may hinder the community's own efforts to better prepare for a recurrence of the disaster.

7. Relief efforts may obscure underlying political realities.

8. Re-establishment of the local economy and job security is usually more important to disaster-stricken communities than material assistance.

An effective, coordinated and well-publicised drought relief mechanism needs to be institutionalised. This scheme needs to be considered as an on-going one. State and other allocations should be budgeted for as part of annual budgets. Drought relief reserves could help provide the following:

- full-time relief officers
- monitoring
- food for work
- afforestation
- food for nutrition programme
- contingency plans
- public health measures
- rigs for boring boreholes / drinking wells
- cattle camps and relief camps
- infrastructural improvements through job-creation
- fodder relief

The development of these programmes and procedures is essential to move away from the ad-hoc and inadequate relief measures available at present.