

# DISASTERS AND DEVELOPMENT

One area in which KwaZulu is reluctantly having to gain experience is in relief management following natural disasters. Droughts, floods, windstorms and veld fires have all caused human misery and wide-scale destruction of crops, livestock and the physical infrastructure.

Drought, which is commonly described as one of the most insidious causes of human misery, spread across many districts in KwaZulu between 1980 - 1984. The ensuing widespread crop failure and livestock losses seriously affected the people's ability to feed themselves. The drought also brought new dimensions of stresses

and strains to rural communities as families and communities competed for limited water resources and long queues formed at pumps or alongside roads awaiting water tankers. Many families abandoned their farming efforts. Thousands of others drifted towards the urban areas and settled in shacks in the fringe areas while desperately trying to find work. The more determined farmers continued their farming activities by ploughing and gardening near the river banks. Their courage and determination was hardly rewarded when in January 1984, Cyclone Demoina caused the worst flooding ever recorded in KwaZulu.

ose three days of torrential rain twenty six major bridges were either destroyed or severely damaged. Hundreds of kilometres of road were left impassable. Thousands of traditionally built dwellings collapsed, damaging or destroying possessions and leaving families with no roof over their heads. Thousands of hectares of crops, which were to be the first crops following the prolonged drought, were left underwater, or in waterlogged soil, or under sand. At least 200 families lost all their possessions when their homes and much of their livestock were swept away by flood waters.

Two weeks later Cyclone Imboa

would help the KwaZulu Government Service identify both new strengths and weaknesses in its own service delivery.

The popular image of disaster victims being bewildered and confused following a disaster proved not to be the case, particularly in the areas where the way of life is still strongly determined by tradition. Victims of the floods and heavy rain were taken in and cared for by relatives and neighbours. In many areas communities mobilised themselves to re-erect fencing, repair roads and help families rebuild their dwellings. Many of the affected areas buzzed with self-



The bridge at Ulundi pictured being swept away during Cyclone Demoina

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Cyclone Demoina swept through twelve magisterial districts and in th-

struck — again causing very serious flooding. Department of Water Affairs officials, afraid that the Pongolapoort Dam would be threatened by further heavy rainfall opened the sluice gates of the dam which resulted in even more areas being flooded in the Ingwavuma district.

For rural people already reeling under the drought and recession, this extraordinary set of disasters must have seemed like the end of the world. For KwaZulu Government Service employees, the magnitude of the disaster was difficult to fully comprehend. However, out of the chaos and apparent hopelessness many important lessons were learnt which would not only help the stricken communities rise above their immediate problems but

organised reconstruction activities. It would appear that the more dynamic the local community leadership and the remoter the community, more was done by the community itself. On the other hand, victims in the townships like Ncotshane and Madadeni displayed less ability to take care of their problems and seemed to rely heavily on outside help and resources.

The self-help capacities of the rural areas in a crisis situation revealed strengths and potential for self-help which development field workers have yet to tap effectively. Professional workers who often see themselves as providing direction in both development and disaster situations perhaps need to rethink their role and seek to cultivate greater skills in supporting



**A small boy surveys the remains of his home after a veld fire**



**Helicopters were used to assist Government workers after Cyclone Demoina destroyed major bridges**

the community's efforts to help themselves.

Perhaps another lesson that has been learnt is that bringing in outsiders to help in crisis situations is probably not very helpful, especially if they have no particular contribution to make. They can inadvertently impede operations as, inevitably, they are unfamiliar with the local situation and environment and waste time trying to seek out information that the community itself already knows. Furthermore, they amount to extra people to be fed and accommodated, thus putting an additional strain on resources. It appears to be a more effective and appropriate strategy to let the community assess its own needs and direct its own relief organisation utilizing organisational and physical structures which are familiar to them. Outside organisations can best assist by putting resources, whether in cash or kind, at the disposal of affected communities but should not attempt to direct relief operations.

The KwaZulu Government is fortunate in having an excellent working relationship with the Natal region of the South African Red Cross Society. An important aspect of relief management is to have a degree of flexibility and not have "red tape" holding things up. It is for this reason the KwaZulu Government prefers to have the Red Cross Society receiving and distributing relief aid both in cash and kind. The KwaZulu Government assists where it

can and its facilities, such as schools and clinics, and its personnel, such as clinic nurses, and teachers, play a major role in the organisation of relief at local level. However, from an overall administration point of view, it accepts that the already overloaded bureaucracy would have difficulty in matching the efficiency and flexibility of the South Africa Red Cross Society which has raised and distributed aid to the value of approximately R6-million in Natal/KwaZulu during the past few years.

The South African Government and the South African Defence Force have also assisted KwaZulu. Cyclone Demoina was declared a "National Disaster" in terms of Section 26 of the Fund Raising Act No. 107 of 1978. The National Disaster Fund paid out close on R10 million to victims of the disaster. This enabled affected families to rebuild their homes and acquire livestock to replace their losses.

Natural disasters inevitably have a considerable impact on development. Many rural people have abandoned hope of any future at all in the rural areas and moved to the peri-urban shack locations. They live under appalling conditions and their frustrations are further exacerbated by their inability to secure jobs, accommodation and "rights" to be in an urban area. Under the circumstances they are totally ripe for political plucking and manipulation. Perhaps much of the tension and anger which spilled

over in August 1985 in the Inanda area has its real origins in the drought and Cyclone Demoina.

On a more positive note, much of the bolder planning for future community development has been derived from the experiences gained during Cyclone Demoina. Areas which had an inter-departmental committee to co-ordinate development (noticeably Ingwavuma/ Ubombo) easily and very effectively slipped into the role of co-ordinating relief operations. Clearly co-ordinating committees need to be introduced throughout KwaZulu and provision must be made for them to co-ordinate relief operations when required. The self-help capacities of rural communities became particularly evident. Clearly much greater effort has to be made to expand that capacity into self-help projects which derive from the people themselves. The bureaucracy's role should be supportive and facilitative rather than imposing and directive.

The people of KwaZulu have experienced serious setbacks to progress and development as a result of natural disasters. But some important and valuable lessons have been learnt which if integrated into future development planning will ensure more effective and appropriate strategies are evolved. In this way, hopefully, something worthwhile may come out of the suffering and misery experienced by so many communities in the past few years.