

The Drought and Poverty Relief

Critical Health

South Africa is currently experiencing one of the worst droughts on record. This is resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of people suffering from malnutrition and dying from hunger and thirst.

The government has made R1bn available to white farmers, most of which will find its way to the banks in the form of loan repayments. However, its contribution to those facing starvation as a result of the drought has been negligible.

Last year, the government imposed a 10% tax on the poor in the form of VAT. It offered to return a fraction of this amount in the form of the poverty relief fund. This amount is included in the health budget figure to create the impression that it has significantly increased the health budget. Furthermore the government is using the poverty relief fund for drought relief. In other words, by means of VAT, the poor are financing their own drought relief, while the government is creating positive publicity for itself.

As a result of the drought, we are experiencing a shortage of grain. The government is making millions of rands from wheat and maize imports. These grains are imported at a low price and then sold on the market at a far higher price. None of this money is being used to lower food prices or for drought relief. The limited amount allocated for drought and poverty relief is but one aspect of the problem. Another concern is the lack of proactive planning and informed distribution of funds on the part of the government.

There are, however, a number of organisations which are attempting to respond to the drought in a more appropriate manner. This edition includes two articles on the issue. The first article is based on an interview with Diane Callear of the National Consultative Forum on the Drought. She argues that the government is starting to respond more appropriately as a result of pressure from a wide range of organisations. This is followed by an update from Operation Hunger in which it expresses serious misgivings about the state's handling of the drought.

The Nutrition Development Programme

According to Callear, the R440m allocated to the poverty relief fund this year would probably be sufficient if the objective of the programme was simply relief of the hungry and if the information had been established to target the food to those who need it most. Neither of these conditions apply. The government has



Collecting water, Zululand. *Photo: Paul Weinberg*

responded to criticism that it does not provide adequate funds for development work by giving the poverty relief a development focus. The fund is being used for a variety of "relief" and "development" objectives. Both are important, but no amount of "development" in South Africa can be achieved with a portion of the R440m and the fund, initially intended for poverty relief, is not meeting that target either.

There is no information base on which to select areas or households with the greatest need and we have no idea if the really hungry are being assisted at all.

Callear says that when the government set up the fund, it did not engage in thorough planning and targeting of its distribution to the most needy. Initially, a very small proportion of the fund had been allocated and this small amount went mostly to non-government organisations which do not have a presence in far-off rural areas where the need is greatest. A Black Consumer Union spokesperson (see 'Taxation and Poverty Relief', *Critical Health* #38) said that the government had no coherent criteria for deciding which organisations should receive a share of the fund, and it often allocated funds to organisations which were not involved in relief work.

Botswana: Successful Poverty Relief

By contrast, a drought relief programme in Botswana in the 1980s worked very well, precisely because of the establishment of a sound information system. Relief funds were administered from the centre by an inter-ministerial drought committee and an early warning technical committee. The latter published monthly reports which it submitted to the ministerial committee. Its reports included crop forecasts, the potential loss of income to families, the nutritional condition of children under five, a report on the feeding programme and reports on weather, water and land conditions. To ensure that these reports were accurate, clinic staff were trained in the selection of children for feeding and, because they were already involved in feeding, clinics were also producing monthly reports on the nutritional status of children under five. By this means, the government, which relied on support from international donors, could work out exactly what it required each year in terms of food types, quantity and technical assistance. Whenever foreign donations were inadequate to meet needs, the government funded programmes itself.

Working Together in Poverty Relief

It is clear that the government in South Africa failed to respond to the current drought in a similar way. As increasing numbers of people have become affected by drought and unemployment, various organisations have tried to tackle this situation. In March 1992, the Independent Development Trust (IDT) called a workshop in Cape Town, and in June, a number of organisations established a National Consultative Forum on Drought. These include trade unions, non-government organisations, churches, liberation movements, the homeland governments, the government and the Development Bank of South Africa.

The forum has set up a so-called "operations room", which is monitoring information flows which show the impact of the drought on various communities countrywide. This task involves finding alternative ways of identifying needy households and a national assessment of the nutritional conditions of children. It also entails developing an early warning system, through regular monitoring of rainfall, water and agricultural conditions. On 27 August, according to Callear, the government gave a commitment that once results from this survey were ready, it would review its current allocations in the light of the results and reallocate funds appropriately. Callear argues that non-government organisations should also be persuaded to transfer their projects to areas that are worst off.

The Consultative Forum has also established task forces in water, public works, agriculture and long term development. The water supply task force has the

very important task of developing a water relief programme in some of the most drought stricken areas, mainly in the northern Transvaal, but suffers an extreme shortage of funds. Its expected need was for R24m over the next few months, but at the time of writing, it has only received a mere R2,2m given as a donation from the European Community.

Meanwhile, many of the members of the forum continue their relief efforts. They are also hampered by their lack of knowledge of the areas of greatest need, although, says Callear, they obviously do their best under the circumstances. This forum includes the churches, Operation Hunger and the Independent Development Trust (IDT). The IDT has set aside R60m for a public works programme and has solicited support from trade unions for this. The projects work on a cash-for-work basis, with wages deliberately held low (R7 a day), in order to attract only those in greatest need. This relief work could not be endorsed by the COSATU affiliated trade unions in any other circumstance. It is, according to Callear, an important aspect of relief as it puts cash into people's hands to buy their bare necessities, including basic food.

The Government's Role

To some extent, Callear argues, the government has improved its own ability to achieve greater co-ordination in the distribution of relief funds. Initially, nutritional development funds were allocated directly from Pretoria leading to very long time delays. At present, funds are distributed by region and population size. It seems that in this way the government has been able to do some positive targeting of regions with the greatest need. For example, the northern Transvaal, one of the most drought stricken areas, has received more than R100m of the R440m fund. The problem, however, is that it is not sufficient to identify regions of need. It is also necessary to develop objective criteria of locating households in greatest need. If these criteria are not developed, it is possible that weaker groups, like households headed by women might be disadvantaged in the distribution of funds. Most of the work of the non-government organisations is in urban areas, and most people who receive assistance are in urban areas. Yet it is known that there is much greater poverty and need in rural areas. The major failure of the programme is its inability to determine and respond to need.

However, not all organisations involved in the distribution of funds agree with distribution at the regional rather than at the central level.

Operation Hunger insists on central funding (see next article). On the other hand, the Black Consumer Union feels that if all funds were directly allocated from the centre, organisations which do not meet official criteria for receiving



There is much greater poverty in rural areas. *Photo: Paul Weinberg* funds would be discriminated against. It is important, therefore, to find a balance between centralized and regional allocation of funds on condition that this involves widespread consultation and involvement of communities.

As a result of pressure from various non-government organisations, the government has created regional, local and district committees for the allocation of funds. This has the effect of reducing the excessive bureaucratic control over the distribution of funds. The government is, according to Callear, finally trying to overcome the problem of lack of information by getting wide representation on the committees, including representatives of civics and other community organisations. Progressive organisations face the dilemma that they could be seen to be providing legitimacy to the government if they participated in these committees. The government will undoubtedly try to obtain "kudos" from this programme without, of course, addressing the causes of such extensive poverty in a middle income country.

However, Callear argues, it is important that the civic representatives should participate. They should, she says, use their position constructively to ensure that funds are properly spent. They need to take information and criteria of the programme back to their communities so that they can assist local non-government organisations to apply for funds to meet the needs of the poorest in their communities.

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