

Disaster without memory: Oxfam's drought programme in Zambia

K. Pushpanath

Introduction

Disaster response has been described as the last resort of the amateur, an unkind assessment but not without a grain of truth. Disaster generates an emotional response and, with each new disaster, new disaster organisations are born. And past lessons on disaster management have to be learnt anew. (*World Disasters Report 1993*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva)

Disaster in Southern Africa is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the region has suffered and continues to endure more than its share of disasters — political and so-called natural. In Angola alone, the UN currently estimates that at least 1,000 people die every day as a result of war and its devastating consequences.

Even against this backdrop, the drought of February 1992 to September 1993 was significant, because of the extent and scale of its impact on an already vulnerable population, in the context of the limited capacities of governments in the region. Indeed, most independent observers and development workers feared that relief measures would be neither effective nor sufficient to stave off a major tragedy.

In retrospect, however, the collective response to this impending disaster demonstrates that, if there is political will and a commitment to work with the people affected, real achievements are possible, in terms of development as well as relief. For many Zambian NGOs, the experience was one of remarkable co-operation and co-ordination,

including innovative relations with the government. Most commentators and politicians agree that the experience of collaboration between the Zambian government and the NGO community in Zambia was very positive indeed, and quite unprecedented.

Background: Oxfam in Zambia

Zambia's economy is overwhelmingly dependent on copper as its major export commodity — a legacy which it inherited from its colonial past. Its economic and social development has thus been intricately linked to the ups and downs of the international market for copper. During the boom years of the 1960s-70s, Zambia was able to adopt a benign, social-welfare model of development, pumping substantial resources into health, education, and urban infrastructure, and generous food subsidies to an already predominantly urban population.

Zambia showed spectacular achievements in education and health during this early period of post-independence. Some areas of the economy were nationalised, and a highly centralised state apparatus emerged. A new Zambian middle class developed, along with a tiny elite which controlled the economic and political reins of the country. Political changes, in the form of a one-party state, reflected an ideological alignment with the then Soviet bloc countries. However, fluctuations in the world copper market led President Kaunda's government to borrow heavily from the IMF and commercial banks to fuel the state-subsidised economy. Accumulated debt started weighing down on the economy, and the quality of life of most Zambians began to suffer. In the largely neglected rural areas, women-maintained households had already become the norm, because of extensive male migration to the urban centres.

Access to land is not necessarily a problem for these rural households, but the lack of appropriate and effective commitment, in terms of either policy or resources, has been a severe constraint on their capacity to break out of the poverty to which their subsistence economy confines them. Food insecurity has become severe in the rural sector, as confirmed through indices of malnutrition and mortality. Economic liberalisation has made these problems even worse.

Oxfam's pre-drought programme in the rural sector kept these factors in view, aiming to enhance and strengthen people's productive capacity through the sustainable use of available natural resources. Oxfam's programme in Zambia is thus characterised by support for local-level

groups — such as women’s associations, youth groups, organisations of disabled people, cooperatives, and so on — who are engaged in a range of productive and economic activities, as well as support for skills development and small enterprises. Training is also encouraged, through workshops and meetings. A small proportion of Oxfam’s support is channelled through intermediary NGOs.

It was the combination of this micro-level experience in Zambia, together with the opportunity to draw on the previous experience of the Country Representative in development and relief programmes in India, which enabled Oxfam to embark on a large-scale drought-relief and rehabilitation programme in the Eastern Province of Zambia. The programme enhanced existing capacity and confidence within Oxfam’s team in Zambia, while also laying the foundations for a recovery programme which aimed to secure rural livelihoods. Oxfam’s experience in Zambia has also attracted the attention of other international NGOs and official aid agencies for its innovative approach to disaster relief.

Oxfam’s approach was based on two assumptions:

- it is possible to approach relief within the framework of development;
- it is feasible to facilitate, motivate, mobilise, and train local people to take charge of the relief effort.

In other words, Oxfam wanted to resist the temptation to administer relief through high-profile operational programmes, which are so beloved of the international media and (consequently) of the people who donate money to aid agencies. For instance, the international media constantly criticised the Indian government for being ‘too rigid’ to invite foreign aid-workers to assist after the 1993 earthquake — even though well-informed observers were pointing out that the government could rely on the enormous reserves of in-country ability to deal with such disasters. Without denying that there were problems, gaps, and considerable political posturing in the provision of post-earthquake aid, this serves as a good example of the collective mind-set of agencies and media alike in relation to disaster response.

This article suggests that operational aid programmes are not the best way to approach relief work, and that often these are not only expensive, but unsustainable and disempowering. The approach adopted by Oxfam in Zambia aimed not only to empower the immediate constituency — the people affected by the drought — but also those who worked alongside them, and ultimately the donors themselves, who became involved in the struggles of ordinary people in an active and dynamic way.

Oxfam's drought programme

The mandate of field staff employed by Oxfam (UK and Ireland) stipulates that 'it is a priority ... to investigate a disaster and to assist with appropriate relief'. In the context of Zambia, this was interpreted as aiming to:

- support the capacity of Zambian groups and NGOs to prepare for and respond to emergencies, thus reducing the temptation for Oxfam to go operational during disaster situations;
- make its own independent assessment, while training its counterpart organisations to become involved in the assessment process;
- ensure that responses are informed by an analysis of the respective roles of men and women, and by attention to issues of sustainability;
- design relief interventions to address causes as well as effects, so that relief and recovery are seen as the two sides of the same coin;
- communicate the underlying causes and future implications of the disaster for vulnerable people to policy-makers, donors, and others, through all possible channels;
- share and build on Oxfam's in-country and international experience;
- promote co-ordinated and integrated approaches among and within NGOs;
- encourage and give voice to local perceptions of problems, and to community-based participation, especially of the most vulnerable categories of people.

The first assessment was undertaken by Oxfam staff, through which a number of civil servants who had had some previous contact with Oxfam were encouraged to act as link people, informing and mobilising other volunteers. Over the following two months, 'information gatherers' were asked to use a standard questionnaire to identify two geographical areas in each of the seven districts in the province to show (a) households that were completely without food; (b) households that might soon run out of food; and (c) households that might run out of food before the next crop. They were also advised to look for other significant factors, such as water shortages, which would intensify the impact of drought. These 'information gatherers' received some token assistance for travel, but otherwise worked mainly as volunteers.

Running parallel to this, a more comprehensive drought profile was being built up by Oxfam across the country, using organisations and individuals who had been trained in the 1991 Development Communication Workshop in Lusaka.¹ This documentation was greatly

valued by policy-makers and official aid agencies, and has continued to be used extensively.

It is important to note that most of the 'information gatherers' had no specialist or formal training, but were backed up by Oxfam's staff through means such as telexes and telegrams to remote areas of Zambia. The fact that their feedback came back in time to compile the drought file is a testimony to the commitment and motivation of these individuals, as well as a demonstration of their good grasp of the issues.

Community mobilisation

From May 1992, over a period of 40 days, Oxfam staff held 14 community workshops in all the seven districts of Eastern Province in Zambia — mass meetings under the sky. These open meetings (using public-address systems) were attended by between 1,000 and 5,000 people each, women and men, old and young — an unprecedented event in the history of NGOs in Zambia. Critical to their success was the participation of women in not only sharing their particular problems, but taking leadership of the various committees that were elected during the meetings.²

These mass meetings achieved the following:

- A clear perception and recognition of problems faced by the people, as articulated by them.
- Ways and means to address these problems by enlisting support from within the community, and thus strengthening its capacity.
- Identification and election of new community leaders.
- The development of a new relationship between government district officials and local communities.
- An enabling climate for the open and confident participation in relief interventions of those people directly affected by the drought.
- The transformation of despair and dejection into an opportunity for people to take control and embark on many new collective activities.

The process also led to setting up village-level and chieftain-level committees to oversee working parties charged with receiving, distributing, monitoring, and accounting for food aid. At district level, it became possible to create disaster and development support groups, consisting mainly of civil servants who came forward as volunteers.

This process mobilised communities and motivated civil servants to work in a radically different way from what they were used to. In all, over 150 civil servants from different ministries came forward. More striking

still was the democratisation process that got started at the village level. There were, of course, many problems in terms of party politics, as well as from within traditional areas of authority. The district groups did not always find it easy to work together in a people-focused and sensitive manner. But the fact remains that, in spite of the many hurdles, the programme gradually developed and started bearing results.

Programme implementation: June 1992— September 1993

The Eastern Province became a bee-hive of activities, which included a government-run Programme for Prevention of Malnutrition in which Oxfam played a major role. The sheer dimensions of the programme attest to the capabilities and capacities of the structures that were established. Over 35,000 tonnes of white and yellow maize had been delivered within 14 months of the programme's launch. An estimated 70,000 households (that is some 350,000 people, representing 33 per cent of the population of the province) were involved, of which about 70 per cent were maintained by women.

A number of Food For Work (FFW) programmes were also planned, monitored, and implemented by the community structures and the district groups. The figures for the year show a remarkable achievement: in a total of seven districts, 2,673 km of roads were constructed and 807 wells built or repaired, in addition to the construction of 82 bridges, 150 houses, 77 clinics and classrooms, 12 storage sheds, 947 pit latrines, and 22 earth dams.

In some areas, the choice of a particular activity was clearly made by the community, while in others it was strongly influenced by the district volunteers. Consequently, the sense of ownership over each FFW programme varied from one area to another, though in general a fair level of success rate was recorded.

There is no doubt that some activities took place because the community had only one option: to participate in the FFW programme in order to get food. But equally, there were cases where the activity started before the food arrived, and others where the activity was completed even when there was no assurance of food. This is an impressive reflection of the efficacy of a people-oriented approach, especially considering that most of the people involved (including Oxfam staff) did not have a great deal of previous experience. More impressive still is that communities were able to achieve all this.

Of course, there was a lot of learning on the job. We improvised and

adjusted directions as the programme unfolded. For instance, a technical team, assembled within one month of starting the relief work, went around the province assisting other groups. Oxfam staff made repeated visits to monitor, advise, and resolve outstanding conflicts through the structures that were established. The process gave people an experience of grassroots democracy at work.

Recovery: agricultural production

A crucial part of the relief response was to integrate Food For Work programmes within an agricultural production programme. Oxfam's experience in the Eastern Province before the drought enabled the staff to identify the main factors behind food insecurity at household level, particularly among the women-maintained households that comprised over two in three households in the area. It was established that these suffered mainly for want of adequate labour, proper and sufficient tools, and reliable fast-maturing seeds.

An outstanding feature of the agricultural production programme was the revival of a cultural practice of working together in groups, but within individual families. This helped labour-deficit women-maintained households to meet planting schedules, and slightly to expand the amount of land under food cultivation.

The same structures which were established for other FFW programmes undertook the distribution of 350 tonnes of maize seed, 10,000x30kg bags of groundnuts, and 34 tonnes of newly-introduced sorghum seeds. The anticipated yield was 450,000x90kg bags of maize, 6,290 tonnes of groundnuts, and 7,150 tonnes of sorghum. In other words, almost 20 per cent of the maize output of the entire province was to be contributed by just 70,000 households!

Distribution and production were not uniformly successful, with occasional practical problems, such as the late delivery of seeds, unmet demand for seed in some areas, and excess supply in others. Overall, however, the intervention justified the assumptions that had been made, and proved that the programme has potential for replication. Perhaps for the first time in decades, many subsistence households produced considerably more than enough to cover their own food needs. A foundation was laid for development work to increase food security and establish sustainable livelihoods in the district, as a part of Oxfam's longer-term strategy in Zambia. Furthermore, the programme proved that relief work can take special account of women's needs — opening up new

ways of thinking about the issue among women and men at village level as well as district level.

Communications: advocacy and lobbying

As the relief measures were being implemented on the ground, we as Oxfam staff saw the critical need to communicate what we were witnessing and hearing, and what was being done about it. Every possible opportunity and channel was explored and used to communicate our findings, and people's responses to the drought-intervention programmes — from village level through to government officials, politicians, and international agency representatives.

For over a decade, Oxfam's programme in Zambia had tried to communicate its micro-level experience within the framework of macro-level policies. The pre-drought work on issues such as debt, poverty, and economic structural adjustment had a comparatively low profile, but nevertheless Oxfam initiated and led many small-scale research projects.³ Interestingly, some of these campaigns had very good support from the government of Zambia.

In October 1991, after the multi-party elections, Zambia saw the emergence of independent mass media, lobby groups, and a more dynamic judiciary. Civil society started to become more vigorous, and non-partisan organisations were slowly showing more courage and determination. In other words, new political spaces were created, discovered, and revived.

The change in political climate meant that Oxfam was able to take a more public stand than before. Other factors also played a part, including:

- its reputation as a genuine grassroots support organisation;
- its effective and substantial response to the drought;
- the Zambian government's invitation to Oxfam, through the Minister of Agriculture, to activate the relief process, because of its own limited experience of drought-response work;
- the government of Zambia's openness and commitment to NGO-led relief activity and the de-politicisation of aid;
- Oxfam's direct and indirect support for communications work in the past;
- a positive climate from official donors towards NGOs;
- Oxfam's capacity to respond rapidly, through providing information and supporting local organisations to undertake campaigning and advocacy work, including through media channels;

- Oxfam's ability to seize the opportunity and mobilise the people affected by drought in such a way that they felt confident to articulate their concerns and aspirations.

The combination of these factors enabled Oxfam to take a more solid public stand in the context of the drought programme. The most strategic aspect of the communication work was through the mass media — radio, television, and newspapers. Many national journalists found that the Oxfam office was an important source of up-to-date and accurate information.

The staff were also able to co-ordinate with the broader campaigning efforts of Oxfam (UK/Ireland) and other European initiatives. Three successful media visits were made at the beginning, middle, and end of the drought programme: reporters from the BBC and *The Observer*, and other European and North American journalists, were helped to understand the drought, its impact, and various responses to it. In every case, a great effort was made to communicate the *context* of the drought, including the transitional nature of the Zambian economy and the country's new-found democratic process.

In conclusion, it was felt that communication is a vital component of relief work, and that our investment repaid positive dividends, not just to Oxfam as an institution, but also in helping people to gain greater control over the relief efforts. The voices of ordinary people were heard, loud and clear, placing those in power under pressure to respond quickly and sensitively to their demands.

Villagers and civil servants for the first time experienced the potential for using the media and other communication channels to influence events and bring about positive change for the benefit of disadvantaged and voiceless people. It was a significant departure for Zambian NGOs to see, appreciate, and make use of these opportunities. Similarly, Oxfam's constituency in the UK and Ireland was actively engaged. The team in Zambia facilitated a visit by a young journalist from a popular music programme on BBC Radio 2, and visits by Oxfam communications staff; their findings helped to inform Oxfam's fiftieth anniversary campaign messages. An outstanding piece of North–South collaboration was a letter-writing campaign, in which the team in Zambia encouraged 15,000 ordinary people, young and old, male and female, to write letters challenging the Structural Adjustment Programme, and describing the impact of debt repayments and government cut-backs on their lives. Oxfam staff in the UK organised the presentation of these letters to world finance ministers at an IMF/World Bank meeting in Washington in 1993 — an initiative which generated much interest in the press.

Lessons from the drought

Oxfam's drought programme in Zambia represents a departure from the usual operational approach to emergency relief. The process was very much an intensive, people-oriented one. The operation faced innumerable hurdles: logistical problems, difficulties in social organisation, and problems of intrusive party politics. Some of the elected committee members distorted information, and abused the trust and confidence of the people. There were sporadic cases of the misuse of maize supplies and improper accounting for relief goods. However, all these problems pale into insignificance when they are put into context — a context in which there were very few people in Zambia with experience in drought-relief operations, particularly at the ground level; where (at the outset) there was no commitment to the level of funding required to respond to people's needs and expectations; where most of the civil servants opted to work as volunteers (though the government did offer some form of subsistence later); where there were extreme difficulties in transport, and communications systems were unreliable. It must also be noted that Oxfam staff were new to this type of work, and the scale of operation in financial terms was at least four times more than anything the office had handled before — indeed, for six months there were only three staff handling the whole operation, besides managing an on-going development programme in the rest of the country.

Irrespective of the programme's serious and admitted shortcomings, one of its major achievements was to incorporate its drought-relief work into a longer-term strategy for ensuring livelihood security — not only where Oxfam continues to be actively involved, but also in those districts where there are no plans for further follow-up.

The programme's five principal achievements can be summarised as follows:

- It has been shown in Zambia for the first time that ordinary people, given an enabling climate, can make enormous positive breakthroughs.
- A body of experience has been developed which will remain in Zambia as a basis for future work. This applies not just to Oxfam staff in Zambia, but to the civil servants and, most importantly, at the grassroots.
- The approach has laid solid foundations at the community level for other initiatives to find long-term solutions to problems such as insecure livelihoods and food insecurity; it opened up new

approaches to drought mitigation and preparedness, and to communication, campaigning, and advocacy work.

- It has exposed many civil servants to a more people-sensitive approach to the issues and challenges of development, and reinforced this through practical experience.
- It released the creative energy of villagers and gave them a means of challenging authority, taking charge, and implementing programmes that were relevant and accessible to them.

The programme represents an experiment with new ways of thinking, and daring to travel on uncharted roads. It is an experience with real potential for replication. It challenges the conventional approach of disaster-relief agencies which prefer to embark on their own operational programmes because these seem to offer easier, more predictable, and more superficially attractive programmes — but which, in so doing, miss the opportunity to develop more sustainable, people-based approaches.

Often when development projects are assessed, there is a tendency to view sustainability only in terms of the material and physical inputs that are needed to run the programme. But the human and social dimensions are even more crucial. The drought crisis was confronted in many different ways, by different people. This is one form of empowerment: people developing the confidence to confront a situation, and daring to do something about it.

In the Zambian context, people's public behaviour had been largely conditioned by their experience of a one-party state. Anything not initiated by the Party was to be viewed with suspicion. It was important for Oxfam staff to demonstrate the importance of accountability in the context of the drought, and the relief goods that were arriving. It was a novel experience for many people to realise that they had a right to have a say in the process of implementing relief programmes. Similarly, it was new and exciting for people to learn that mistakes made by the elected leadership could — and, where possible, should — be rectified.

The way in which the district volunteers were dealt with by the village participants in a recent workshop, especially by women who stood their ground in wanting direct dealing with Oxfam, is a case in point. Their new-found self-confidence had come from actual experience of doing things, having access to information, confronting those in positions of superiority, removing those who obstructed the smooth running of the programme. All this does not mean that villagers have for ever overcome their powerlessness and silence, and will never revert to the obedience

and meekness of the past. Rather, the experience has shown that there are alternatives, and has given them confidence to believe that these are possible. That is perhaps the most important lesson to learn from this experience.

This article opened with a quotation from the IFRC *World Disasters Report*, which suggests that every disaster means that we have to learn lessons anew. Must we really invent the wheel every time a disaster strikes, or can we usefully learn from what we have done so far?

Notwithstanding all the efforts of governments, donors, NGOs, missions, and charities, it was mainly the courage and remarkable determination of ordinary people that contained the disaster in Zambia. This is not to deny the value of all the aid programmes that were so effectively carried out, but rather to pay tribute to the people who were at the receiving end, and in particular to the peasant women of Zambia.

Notes

1 The proceedings of this workshop are recorded in the 'Report of the Development Communication Workshop Jointly Organised by Oxfam and The Weekly Post and UNZA Great East Road Campus, 25th – 29th November 1991', compiled by Moses John Kwali. The workshop was organised in order to take advantage of the emergence of a more confident, independent national press in Zambia. It was attended by 25 people from both rural and urban areas of the country, to learn about information-gathering techniques.

2 The mass meetings were possible in part because of disaster-relief training run by Oxfam in 1989, which had been attended by senior civil servants and village activists. These contacts were critical in mobilising others to gather and communicate more information, and to identify areas of action. Oxfam's existing counterparts, especially the women's production groups and youth programmes, played a pivotal role in gathering and

disseminating information, and mobilising others. The whole process took 40 days, and the running of the mass meetings improved with practice. The original idea was adapted from previous experiences of the Representative in disaster work in India.

Each mass meeting was run like a training workshop, with Oxfam staff acting as facilitators. The logistics (food, material, money, public-address systems) were set up before each visit. The whole discussion was recorded for further use. Each district report was fully compiled within five days of returning from the tour. Oxfam staff mediated where conflicting opinions were emerging.

The participants were given general information about the drought, about Oxfam, and about existing government policies. Brain-storming sessions (each of about 2-4 hours) enabled people to come forward. Open elections were held to select representatives, of whom Oxfam stipulated that 50 per cent should be women. While this was a condition

imposed by Oxfam, there was discussion in the meetings about why this policy had been adopted. The volunteers from the districts who accompanied Oxfam staff at the village level were then asked to facilitate district meetings, in order to set up the district-level organisation.

3 For example, *Adjusting to Adjustment in Zambia: Women's and Young People's Responses to a Changing Economy*, a report commissioned by Oxfam from Gabriel Banda, and published in 1991 in the Oxfam Research Papers series.

■ **K. Pushpanath** has worked as an agricultural extension officer for a development trust in Karnataka, and as an agricultural development officer at the Syndicate Bank in south India. He gained an MA in Development Studies at the University of East Anglia in 1984, the year in which he joined Oxfam, initially in the South India Office, and then as Oxfam's Representative in Hyderabad. He worked in Zambia, as the Regional Representative for Zambia and Malawi, from 1988 to 1993. This paper was first published in *Development in Practice* Volume 4, number 2, in 1994.