

Alert

Swaziland

Drought forces people living with HIV to adopt drastic coping measures

Geneva, 09 August 2011

1. Brief description of the emergency

During July and early August 2011 reports were received of a worsening drought-caused hunger situation in the South Eastern area of Swaziland where the Lutheran Development Service operates. This is an area of endemic drought and perennial food insecurity. Drought during the period January to March withered crops and food supplies are now exhausted. Though grazing is still available the majority of the vulnerable population no longer has livestock.

Critically affected are those people who are HIV¹ positive and have TB² and are on Anti Retroviral Treatment (ART) and TB medication. Taking these medications on an empty stomach produces serious side effects that has reduced patients to eating leaves and cow dung or stopping treatment altogether. IRIN, a humanitarian news and analysis service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that "The Swaziland National Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (SWANNEPHA) confirmed that some of its members were consuming cow dung... It has come to this; the food insecurity most Swazis are experiencing has come up against the world's highest HIV prevalence rate"³. Interruptions of ART and TB medication can be fatal. Likelihood of infecting other household members with TB is increased dramatically.

Food distributions by WFP⁴ have been ongoing for several years to cover the food deficit. In 2009 WFP reduced its help to a small supply to neighbourhood care points catering for vulnerable children. Initially the government took over food distribution to the rest of the vulnerable population. This too has now ceased as the government has run out of money. Many families have reached the end of their traditional survival mechanism which comprise of remittances, wild vegetables, selling assets, community support among others.

1 HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus

2 TB Stands for Tuberculosis

3 (<http://www.plusnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportID=93362>)

4 WFP stands for World Food Programme

This now leaves many vulnerable people very hungry. LDS has an ongoing evaluation in the area and verified the urgent need to get food to those on medication. Urgent applications to government for help have been unsuccessful so far.

2. Impact

Inadequate food supply has many ill effects. Some people have started to exchange sex for money or food, this practice increases the HIV prevalence rate which is already high. Many families are skipping meals as a means of coping. Other families miss meals for a whole day.

Hunger is a huge problem for those taking medication for TB and Antiretroviral Treatment for AIDS. Both these medications have severe side effects when taken on an empty stomach. These are so severe that patients are reduced to eating leaves and even cow dung, or even worse stopping taking medication. "We have resorted to eating rubbish for purposes of taking our ARVs because they must be consumed after a meal" reports Plus News of IRIN OCHA⁵. The BBC of 27 July 2011 also reports that "The drugs do not work on an empty stomach, so patients have to use the dung - mixed with water - instead of food, the activists say"⁶ For the HIV positive a break in treatment accelerates the terminal phases of the illness whereas a break in TB treatment increases the prevalence of multi drug resistance TB strains.

3. National and international response

The government is broke and has no funds to meet the crisis. Very small quantities of food are being distributed through the members of parliament and this has caused a lot of problems in the communities politicizing distribution. Most of the affected people are left out or get very small quantities of food. WFP has stocks in country but is only giving food to Neighbourhood Care Points (NCPs). Other NGOs are trying to source food and funds for other areas.

There are some small stocks of food in government warehouses but has no means to distribute them. LWF through LDS is part of a food security consortium lobbying to get some of this food from warehouses to the most needy but this is taking too long for the worst affected.

4. ACT Alliance response

LWF through LDS had some funds to assist "Home Based Care" to the terminally ill. We have used these to make initial purchases of high protein porridge (Morvite) and managed to eke out scarce transport to deliver. These resources are now exhausted.

The National Disaster Management Authority has requested the NGOs to assist them in counting the food in government warehouses so that they may know how much more is needed. The process is complicated and will take time and the affected people may be dying by then. We know that government is broke and we are not sure that this will develop into effective action in the foreseeable future.

5. Planned activities

LWF through LDS plans to purchase a two months supply of food supplements (sufficient for one meal per day) for the people who are on medication and to make two distributions. During this time

⁵ <http://www.plusnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportID=93362>).

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-1431242>.

they would conduct a detailed assessment and will prepare longer term plans. They should by then be in a better position to know how much if anything will come from negotiations with government and World Food Programme (WFP). They want the people to immediately continue to take the medication whilst they look for a longer term solution. The ideal would be two meals per day but one meal would be sufficient to avert disaster.

This response will serve 1,200 people who are HIV or TB positive and receiving Anti Retroviral or TB treatment and who are unable to source regular meals due to the ongoing drought and lack of food distribution. It will give those 5 kg of "Morvite", an energy nutritional supplement each month for two consecutive months. LWF will submit a Rapid Response Fund request to respond to this crisis.

Any funding indication or pledge should be communicated to Jean-Daniel Birmele, ACT Chief Finance Officer (Jean.Daniel.Birmele@actalliance.org).

Thank you for your attention.

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