

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

ZAMBIA

UNICEF CONVENES, COORDINATES AND CONTRIBUTES. AND KANYAMA CONTINUES...

Wizi Chisanga has been a registered nurse at Lusaka's Kanyama health centre for five years. Working as a health-care professional in one of the poorest countries in the world she has seen it all: the HIV and AIDS pandemic, cholera, malaria, and dysentery. Zambia's 2008 floods, however, were extreme even for a professional of her experience.

"It was really a barrier to our services," she remembers. "Working by candlelight, we faced some major problems. As the power was almost always cut, save for an hour or two daily, little health-care service delivery could be implemented. The maternity ward was shut down, HIV patients were given extra supplies of vital antiretroviral drugs to take home, most clients were referred to health centres in alternative portions of the city, and vaccines were in danger of expiring without refrigeration. Even the morgue became a problem as there was no power. Bodies were beginning to decompose."

However, it wasn't only Kanyama's health centre that was experiencing difficulties. As the township is home to over 116,000 people, many with informal water and sanitation infrastructures, rain began filling the numerous latrines and shallow wells, forcing effluence to mix with drinking and washing water. As a result, diarrhoea was rapidly growing out of control. Moreover, cholera was beginning to spread. During Zambia's last rainy season, this Lusaka compound experienced 321 cases of cholera. Eleven of these resulted in fatalities. Worse yet, the mosquito population also peaked, doubling the malaria prevalence rate. With frontline experience of these diseases, nurse Chisanga feared for her own family's health. Fortunately, help was not far away.

Partnering with the Government of the Republic of Zambia and civil society, UNICEF laboured to help gain control over the situation before the city's living environment became critically dangerous. And as the situation deteriorated, specialists from UNICEF Zambia worked closely with imported expert UNICEF emergency personnel to procure, coordinate and monitor.

As UNICEF's Representative in Zambia Lotta Sylwander reflects on the 2008 first and second quarter emergency, she articulates how potentially dangerous the situation might have become. "It was understood by both our staff and partners that with an already strained health-care system, in conjunction with the worsening flood conditions, the possibility of numerous disease epidemics was exacerbated. This could have led to significant loss of life throughout the compound, city and even country. Fortunately, many organizations, including UNICEF, worked together to alleviate the compounding emergency, halt the spread of disease and assist people in getting back to a sense of normality. If interventions hadn't been executed, many more people would have perished."

Utilizing the organization's capability to source large quantities of resources and supplies quickly, UNICEF Zambia procured chlorine and insecticide-treated mosquito nets for immediate distribution to areas such as Kanyama and sourced resources to assist the city of Lusaka in pumping water from flooded areas. All told UNICEF Zambia disbursed US\$ 1,397,944.65 in assistance to flood-affected areas throughout the country. Moreover, the visiting emergency personnel took critical roles in coordinating the many agencies and organizations working to alleviate the situation – a vital contribution to the country's flood relief effort. As a result, the rains' impact was greatly diminished, long-term damage was mitigated and many lives were saved, in large part thanks to both UNICEF Zambia, who was able to react swiftly, and to UNICEF globally and the great capacity and experience it has to offer in an emergency.

Once the showers stopped and the flood water receded Zambians began picking up the pieces and rebuilding. "Yes, it took a couple of months to settle, but we are back to normal now, and as busy as ever!" nurse Chisanga laughingly shares. "From this experience we have seen a lot of changes, and our centre is being supplied with more mosquito nets, a generator, solar panels and a reconstructed sanitation system. We are better prepared for the rains this year, and are looking forward to the rains!"