

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

ANGOLA

WIPING OUT CHOLERA STEP BY STEP

Today, visitors coming to the Lubango cholera treatment centre will have no idea what the place looked like a year and a half ago. At that time, when floods affected the southern region of Angola, an average of one hundred patients was admitted every single day. Today, thanks to an all-out effort to control and prevent cholera cases, the centre has less than a dozen patients.

Cholera continues to be a threat to children in Angola. It may be hard for them to remember basic cholera prevention measures, such as handwashing with soap, but to help children and their families adopt safe hygienic practices UNICEF regularly distributes soap and targets the population with social mobilization activities.

Handwashing alone, although a fundamental and low-cost intervention, will not solve the problem of recurrent cholera. Underlying the outbreaks of cholera are problems with basic sanitation and clean water supply, areas in which UNICEF is assisting the Government of Angola to ramp up their services to the population.

For Abel da Costa, Provincial Director of Energy and Water in Huíla Province, UNICEF has forever been his main partner. As Mr. da Costa puts it, "UNICEF has been a key player in helping to take forward lots of work in the water sector and the organization has always supported me in building the capacity of my team. We have other partners as well but none like UNICEF that makes us go further and ensure we move forward with sustainable projects."

One of the projects referred to by Mr. da Costa is located in Capelongo, in the municipality of Matala, a two-hour drive from Huíla's provincial capital, Lubango. A major aim of this project is to prevent cholera. Thanks to an agreement between the Provincial Government and UNICEF, the villagers of Capelongo now have access to piped water in their homes. Before, they had to walk 4 kilometres to the nearest source. A striking difference between now and then is that now there are NO reported cholera cases in Capelongo.

While there is promising progress, much remains to be done. The villagers of Capelongo have seen a dramatic improvement in their lives, but others still need assistance. Although numbers have dropped, there are patients back at the Lubango cholera treatment centre. UNICEF's Resident Programme Officer for the southern region of Angola, João Neves, recently met and spoke with two of them.

Maria Calumbe and her daughter Julieta are currently patients at the Lubango cholera treatment centre. Ms. Calumbe had taken her five-year-old daughter to the centre on suspicion that she might have cholera. At the centre, Julieta was promptly treated by professional staff with intravenous rehydration fluids and later also received oral rehydration salts. Once Julieta fully recovers, she and her mother will have a meeting with one of the nurses at the centre who will explain the basics on how to prevent cholera. Also, they will receive information and education materials supplied by UNICEF.

When asked if she knew about UNICEF, Ms. Calumbe said, "Yes, I know about UNICEF. Maybe I never noticed it much, but you helped saving my daughter and for that I am very, very thankful!"

As for Mr. Neves, meeting with Ms. Calumbe and her daughter reaffirmed his faith that UNICEF is indeed helping to save lives. As he said, "We are here to help authorities cope with emergency situations like cholera. In a very concrete sense, this means saving lives, such as young Julieta's life. But more importantly, it is to help ensure that Julieta and her family – and hundreds more families just like them – will never have to go through this again."