



DEVELOPING RADIO PARTNERS

## Focus: National Alert System

Zambia is faced with multiple disasters this year. We had a problem with army worms that attacked most of the maize crops. Then, there was the problem of inconsistent rain – and then too much rain -- causing additional worries for farmers.

The disaster and mitigation unit of the meteorological department came on board to try to offer solutions to these problems, but the damage had already been done.

The floods that hit parts of eastern province were not predicted in time by the Met department – leaving farmers caught unaware. There was a loss of livestock and crops – and bridges were washed out making it difficult, if not impossible, for farmers to get the crops that survived to market on time.

An effective national weather alert system brings about preparedness. It also makes resource mobilisation easier as those responsible will have the information in time to save some or all of their crops and livestock.

There is also a need to use technologies such as mobile phones, using text messaging services, to warn people about floods or droughts so that they can prepare in time.

# The Weekly Information Resource Bulletin

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- Bring listeners in the project area the latest information on natural resources, the environment and agriculture
- Focus on solutions, what works and what people can do
- Encourage listeners to share both their questions and solutions (African solutions for African problems)
- Raise awareness of issues that need to be discussed to affect public policy.
- Bring the latest solutions and practices that have relevance to this region from around the world
- Identify and link other NGOs working in the region share the project interests and goals
- Give the participating journalists guidance and tips on their reporting on these issues

## The Problem: Challenges of national alert system

Floods and other natural disasters can only be avoided with timely information from weather forecasters.

Information on weather patterns is not always reaching those who need it most. For instance, most of the information on weather forecasts is mainly done on television (ZNBC TV) and the four main radio stations (ZNBC Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 4), but these channels don't reach every part of the country. In some places, the station's signal is so weak that people can only hear or see the station sporadically.

There is also the issue of the forecasters not speaking in a way that many people can understand. Most of the weather information that is brought out read in this way: "the rains will be normal to above normal." Many people, especially farmers, wonder what the meteorologist means.

There is also the issue of structure, for instance, the Zambia Meteorological Department is under the Ministry of Works and Supply, and then there is the Disaster and Mitigation Unit which is under the vice president's office and to make it even more confusing, the national early warning unit is under the Ministry of Agriculture. This brings about inefficiency in the coordination of responses at the national level.

The Meteorology Department also lacks human resources. Most of the skilled people have left the department and there have been budget cuts.

Another challenge is the lack of investment in new technology. The technology that is used to capture data is old – and not always reliable.

If all these units are brought under one roof there could be greater efficiency in the way disasters are dealt with at the national level.

## Activities for Journalists

Eneya Maseko, who is the disaster reduction programmes officer at Oxfam, remembers how he had to get weather information about Livingstone from the BBC weather forecast because Zambia's Meteorological Department didn't have any information on their website.

This is one of the challenges facing the national alert system. Communication channels have not been fully put in place. Firstly, there must be a priority to get information to the people and one of the most useful tools is the community radio station.

An example is Zambezi FM in Livingstone. It has made the weather bulletins a priority. It broadcasts these weather bulletins in Tonga and Silozi -- making sure most of population understands what is said since most of the station's listeners speak these languages.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Meteorological Department is using an SMS system where farmers can subscribe and receive weather information on how many litres of rain is predicated and what crops to plant each season. This is a great way to get information to farmers, but the problem is -- the SMS program is not consistent.

There is also need for the national early warning unit under the Ministry of Agriculture to look at other disasters that don't just affect agriculture. The decision to look only at agriculture-related disasters is too narrow as there can be other weather issues that can happen away -- such as the wash out of bridges and roads as a result of heavy rains. This kind of information should also be included in the national

alert system.

As mentioned, these departments that deal with disasters need to be coordinated properly and be put under one department or ministry -- to increase efficiency and strengthen the quality of information dissemination.

Interview a member of the disaster management and mitigation unit. What can be done to make the national alert system more effective? Ask farmers what kinds of information they would like to receive. Do farmers think the national alert system is working? If not, why?

Ask farmers how effective the current structure in dealing with a national disaster is -- and how it can be made better.

Does your station regularly provide accurate weather information? If not, why not?

Does your station receive weather forecasts from the government in a timely manner? How could this system be made better?

### Useful Link

Makweti Sishekanu, National Farmers Union Zambia:  
+260-211-252-649 or +260-965-098-360. Email:  
[makwetiskanu@yahoo.com](mailto:makwetiskanu@yahoo.com)

Teddy Kabunda Oxfam. Humanitarian Coordinator also  
Member of Disaster and management Unit Cell:  
0977655952

Mr Komoki Director. Zambia meteorological department.  
Phone : 021 125 1912, 021 125 2728