

Australia's Response to the 1997 PNG Drought

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Abstract

Through the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the Australian Government responded to what was probably the worst drought to hit PNG this century. The aim was to ease the suffering of isolated communities. Between October 1997 and April 1998, in a joint program between the governments of PNG and Australia, a total of approximately 100,000 people in areas accessible only by air were assisted with basic food rations consisting of rice, flour and cooking oil for between one and six months. In early 1998, AusAID also worked with the government of PNG to distribute vegetable seeds and/or seed potato to each of PNG's provinces to ensure that those worst affected by the drought would have planting material when the drought broke.

The drought that hit PNG in 1997 was the third 'big event' of the year; the first being the 'Sandline affair' and the second the national elections. At least two books have already been written about Sandline, and at least a dozen doctorates will come from analysis of the Skate and Morauta governments. Reams could equally be written about the drought—arguably the worst to hit PNG this century. Thus, it is clearly difficult to describe the role of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) in the drought relief operation in a short paper. With apologies for what is unsaid, particularly for the tendency to understate the critical and much-appreciated role our many partners played, this paper outlines the major landmarks and features of Australia's relief effort in PNG, and concludes with some lessons for the future. Though we hope and pray the 1997 drought was the last to hit PNG, the old farmers' adage of 'expect the best but prepare for the worst' is prudently applied to such matters.

Australia's Initial Response

Around mid-1997, PNG's national newspapers carried articles describing communities affected by food and/or water shortages as a result of extreme frosts and drought. These types of articles, highlighting the impact of natural events and seeking government assistance, are not uncommon in PNG and there was little to suggest that anything out of the ordinary was taking place. Initial inquiries by AusAID met with reassurances that seasonal drought and frosts were common, and that people's coping mechanisms were robust.

AusAID became aware that the situation was potentially quite a bit more serious than originally thought in late August 1997 through the coincidence of two events.

Firstly, we were contacted by the Rumginae Health Centre outside Kiunga to provide transport for medical supplies and food urgently required to keep the health centre operational. The Fly River, by that time, was so low that barges were not able to bring these supplies to Kiunga. A visit to the area confirmed that a number of church-run health and education facilities in the Kiunga area were in urgent need of assistance to transport essential supplies.

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At almost the same time, we were contacted by the PNG Government seeking funding for Dr Michael Bourke and Dr Bryant Allen of The Australian National University to undertake an assessment of the extent and severity of the drought and frosts and the impact on communities.

AusAID's response was rapid: with the assistance of the Australian Defence Force, we transported essential supplies to Kiunga in September and we provided funding for the first drought assessment in September/October.

The First Drought Assessment: Australia's Contribution to the Response

Drs Bourke and Allen and their team concluded that there were at least 150,000 people in communities across PNG whose normal resilience to shortages of food and/or water had been exceeded by the drought gripping the country, and a further 170,000 people who were close to the point of no longer being able to cope.

The Australian Government's reaction to these sobering findings was an offer to deliver food rations to the worst-affected communities in locations only accessible by air. This offer was made on the basis that the PNG Government could then channel its resources to purchasing food supplies and delivering these to badly affected communities accessible by either road or water. It was also made on the basis of comparative advantage: PNG's air capacity is limited and at the time was heavily utilised for normal functions.

The offer of assistance was accepted. Between October 1997 and April 1998, AusAID and the Australian Defence Force worked in close cooperation with the PNG National Disaster and Emergency Services and the PNG Defence Force on the largest and most complex emergency humanitarian aid activity that AusAID has ever managed as a lead agency.

During the drought operation, more than 100,000 people in remote locations in Sandaun (West Sepik), Western, Gulf, Enga, Southern Highlands, Central, Morobe, Oro (Northern) and Milne Bay provinces were assisted. Food rations—set by the National Disasters Committee and comprising 8 kilograms of rice, 2 kilograms of flour and 1 litre of cooking oil per person per month—were delivered to central locations for distribution to each individual. Some communities received food supplies for just one month, while others were supported for up to six months.

At the same time, AusAID funded complementary activities, including a nutrition assessment, purchase and delivery of essential pharmaceuticals to combat drought-related sickness and water supply advice. In addition, AusAID provided substantial funding for drought relief projects undertaken by nongovernment organisations.

Emerging from the Drought

AusAID and the PNG Government monitors constantly reassessed the requirement of individual communities for food relief. This was formalised through two follow-up drought assessments in November/December 1997 and March 1998.

A critical issue, identified very early in the drought response, was the need to ensure that affected communities had adequate planting material once the rains started again. It was considered that Australia could make a contribution to this area by providing seed potato and vegetable seeds to areas badly affected by the drought, and by delivering this planting material into areas only accessible by air. In the end, nearly 22,000 kilograms of vegetable seeds and 350 tonnes of seed potatoes were delivered to almost all of PNG's 19 provinces. This seed distribution was never intended to fully address the needs of most people for planting material—particularly those whose staple diet is sweet potato. The generosity and cooperation of fellow Papua New Guineans in providing sweet potato runners, in particular, to needy communities should not go unmentioned in this regard.

Did Australia's Aid Effort Make a Difference?

It was alleged at the time, and these arguments have since been repeated, that Australia had mixed and largely self-interested reasons for providing approximately A\$30 million worth of assistance to PNG as part of the drought-relief operation. The answer to this allegation is an unequivocal 'no': Australia sought only to relieve the suffering of ordinary people in PNG.

In respect of the food rations, our assessment was, and remains, that we stood to 'add the greatest value' in areas only accessible by air, and that the PNG Government had the resources to address the other badly-affected but more accessible areas.

Whether or not anyone had already died in the areas where food relief was eventually provided, or whether

or not the assistance Australia provided saved any lives, are not helpful questions. Measuring the extent to which Australian food deliveries relieved hunger and reduced sickness and longer-term health impacts is an almost impossible exercise. Most of the areas where the food supplies were delivered are under-serviced, population figures are sketchy and health statistics are questionable. Like the international effort to combat the Y2K computer problem, the question of how bad things might have been is likely to remain moot.

Planting material was provided to help people get back on their feet. Seed potato, in particular, is not readily accessible in the Asia–Pacific region. By sourcing and supplying seed potato, Australia was again assisting in an area where it had a comparative advantage and where its efforts could complement those of PNG and other donors.

In a bid to counteract the increased incidence of diet-related infection and illness imposed by the drought, AusAID distributed pharmaceuticals to the value of 1.2 million PNG kina (PGK),¹ as requested by the Department of Health.

During November 1997, the Australian Government invited Australian nongovernment organisations to submit proposals for activities that would supplement relief efforts already under way in PNG. Australia funded six proposals covering water supply, agricultural recovery, health and the supply and distribution of food.

Lessons for the Future

AusAID commissioned an evaluation of its involvement in the drought relief operation in April 1998 before memories faded.

The evaluation drew many conclusions, but possibly the most important one is that intended beneficiaries received between one-half and three-quarters of their intended food rations. By international measures, this is an outcome to be proud of and signals the success of the cooperation between AusAID, PNG National Disaster and Emergency Services, the Australian Defence Force, the PNG Defence Force, targeted villages, the people in these villages who assumed responsibility for distribution, and PNG's private sector suppliers.

The evaluation highlighted things that could have been done differently to produce a better outcome.

¹ In 1997, 1 PGK = approx. US\$0.7 (A\$0.95).

Key recommendations included the following.

- Inclusion of professional relief assessors as part of the assessment teams and continuing reassessment by these experts to ensure that relief is delivered only to those areas and people who cannot meet their own needs.
- Deployment of monitors to focal areas. These monitors would be required to check that relief supplies are being passed down the chain to the most remote villages in each location. They would also reaffirm population estimates.
- Strengthening of PNG's National Disaster and Emergency Services and provincial and district disaster networks. This assistance is to be delivered under a major AusAID-funded project commencing shortly.
- Support for rural health services so that populations are more resilient to future droughts. AusAID is providing assistance in this area through a series of major health projects being implemented with the PNG Government.
- Earlier attention to agricultural rehabilitation, including the earlier delivery of planting material.
- Provision of safe and permanent water to communities in rural PNG.
- Assistance for rural development programs that include crop diversification, processing and storage.

Conclusion

Collectively, we learnt many lessons from the joint drought relief operation, though several factors conspired against us acting on all of those lessons straight away.

The rains came to most places by about December 1997 and within weeks or, at worst, months people had resumed their normal diets. Hunger and thirst quickly became a distant memory for many.

Those most closely involved with the drought operation were tired. The drought demanded more than six months of sustained effort, and the work had been, at times, demoralising as even our collective best efforts were not enough to provide relief to all who needed it.

And then just as we had gathered enough energy to focus on post-drought development requirements, the horrific tsunami struck Aitape.

Though the people of Aitape could never be described as fortunate, they did benefit from a relief operation that was somewhat more effective and efficient than it might otherwise have been. The people of PNG, who had just come through the drought together, expressed a sense of nationhood and poured contribu-

tions into Aitape. PNG government officials, non-government organisations, donors, the PNG and Australian Defence Forces and the community were well-practised at working together and settled quickly into complementary roles. The National Disaster and Emergency Services, under the late Ludwig Kambu, was better equipped to fulfil its mandate and provided essential coordination of the relief and rehabilitation phases.

Now, however, it is time to turn our thoughts back to the drought and what needs to be done to ensure that future droughts do not cause the level of suffering and hardship of the 1997 drought. This conference is timely and critical, and AusAID applauds the organisers for the opportunity to participate and contribute in ever so modest a way.