

Responding to emergencies

When disaster strikes – drought, flood, earthquake or war – any time lost in delivering aid can literally cost lives.

Working closely with other Oxfams, we respond to emergency situations by providing urgent humanitarian assistance including food and clean water. We also help communities rebuild their lives and become better equipped to face disasters in the future.

Case study: Sudan

In what is the world's worst humanitarian disaster, over one million people have been forced to leave their homes in Darfur, western Sudan, fleeing fighting and danger. Oxfam is working in camps set up for the displaced people in Sudan and those who have fled to neighbouring Chad. We are constructing latrines and providing clean drinking water and washing facilities, to prevent the spread of disease.

Story: Clean plastic buckets make a difference

Distributing soap, women's clothing and household supplies is an essential component of our efforts to improve the public health situation for displaced people in Darfur.



A woman in Kalma camp.
Credit: Krista Riddley/ Oxfam

Oxfam takes an integrated approach to public health, with several teams working simultaneously in places like Kass and Kalma to improve access to water and sanitation facilities and prevent the spread of disease.

“Our engineers dig wells and latrines, build water tanks and install tapstands to increase the availability of clean water in the camp,” explains Marguerite Hondow, co-ordinator of Oxfam’s Public Health Promotion team in South Darfur.

“But what good is all that clean water if it goes into filthy, contaminated containers? People need to be able to collect and store their water safely, or else their families will get sick.”

Children most vulnerable

In any humanitarian crisis, children are the most vulnerable. A recent survey by the World Health Organisation covering the period between June and August showed that over 50% of deaths in Darfur for children under the age of five were related to diarrhoea.

Diarrhoea is often caused by unsafe water, inadequate sanitation facilities and poor hygiene practices. Oxfam's public health promoters work closely with displaced communities to teach people the importance of washing hands, using latrines, and other safe practices.

Distributing clean buckets and other essential household supplies gives people some of the tools they need to keep their families healthy.

"The situation in many camps remains precarious," Hondow continues, "but our hard work together with other aid agencies working in the camp has paid off. So far we have prevented major outbreaks of diseases such as cholera and typhoid."

Clothing

How can women's clothing be really linked to hygiene and health? The answer is clear. Women who are looking after their children's needs before their own will rarely waste precious resources on themselves.

Very few have a change of clothes – they fled in what they stood in. Ancient clothes become torn and soiled. Without a change of clothes how can you properly wash the dirty ones? With spare clothes to wear the women are able to keep themselves and their families clean. However, it is more than that. Oxfam is committed to treating those affected by disasters not as helpless victims in need of what we see fit to give them, but as human beings like any other. Amongst the many things these people have lost during the terrifying events of recent months is their personal dignity.

Forced to beg for mercy, flee for their lives, and survive with nothing. If a piece of cheap cloth can enable them to take some pride in themselves, hold their heads up in the camp, and regain some human dignity, then perhaps it is the most precious of all the items.

Activities

- Locate Sudan and Chad on a map.
- Read the account of the refugee camps in Sudan and Chad and rewrite as a newspaper report or story for a radio news report.
- Make a list of natural disasters or conflicts that have taken place throughout the world and on a map indicate where they have occurred.