Mozambique saved from floods due to early warning

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An aerial photo shows the devastated southern Mozambican town of Chokwe on January 25, 2013. Engulfed by a raging torrent of water last week, Chokwe was all but destroyed for the second time in 13 years, but it emerged with a hugely lower death toll thanks to a decade-long effort.

Engulfed by a raging torrent of water last week, the town of Chokwe in southern Mozambique was all but destroyed for the second time in 13 years, but it emerged with a hugely lower death toll.

As in 2000 when floods of biblical proportions claimed 800 lives, an underdeveloped network of dams and dykes allowed the swollen Limpopo River to burst its banks, submerging most of the province of Gaza, where Chokwe is located, under metres (feet) of water.

But thanks to a decade-long effort to lessen the impact of natural disasters in Mozambique, most people escaped this time.

"Better climate science, more government commitment to use early warning information, good collaboration with local radio stations, word of mouth of Red Cross volunteers—all of these combined resulted in people moving before their lives were in danger," said Alexander Matheou, the International Red Cross's regional representative for East Africa.

Floods since early January have claimed 68 lives and displaced some 250,000 people countrywide.

Although the latest floods were not as severe in size or duration as the 2000 disaster, experts believe the impact could have been much worse.

"In 2000, there was no early warning to the population, so there were a lot more people who suffered and died," said UN World Food Program spokeswoman Lola Castro.

Immediately following the 2000 flood, donors poured $480 million into Mozambique to prevent another crisis of similar magnitude.

This allowed the government to create a national strategy to deal with disasters.

"It focused on the question of creating resilience amongst people and communities," said Rita Almeida, the National Disaster Management

Institute spokeswoman.

Residents flee to the roof of a house in Chokwe district, to escape the floods, on January 25, 2013. Engulfed by a raging torrent of water last week, Chokwe was all but destroyed for the second time in 13 years, but it emerged with a hugely lower death toll thanks to a decade-long effort.

Nearly 40,000 people were resettled in less flood-prone areas. Investments in water management infrastructure and meteorological agencies were prioritised, at least on paper.

But the most successful project was the early warning system the government and NGOs introduced.

Mozambique Red Cross Society, the initiative's primary driver, funded a five-year disaster preparedness programme in 18 communities styled on

schemes in the Philippines and Latin America.

With many rural dwellers lacking basic services like electricity—let alone telephones or television—planners took a community-based approach to design the system.

Local disaster committee members were trained in life-saving cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and equipped with emergency kits such as whistles, megaphones and life-jackets to help boost disaster response. Radios were distributed, enabling them to receive cyclone or flood warnings from the authorities and then pass on these messages by word of mouth.

The strategy ensures that each community has the basic ability to respond to a disaster, making them less reliant on a centralised response.

A resident of flood-hit Chokwe in southern Mozambique drinks drain water, on January 27, 2013. Engulfed by a raging torrent of water last week, Chokwe was all but destroyed for the second time in 13 years, but it emerged with a hugely lower death toll thanks to a decade-long effort.

Geography still leaves Mozambique vulnerable, however, whatever disaster reduction measures are in place.

Thirteen rivers with sources in neighbouring countries empty into the Indian Ocean after traversing Mozambique, which must rely on South Africa and Swaziland to keep downstream areas in mind when managing their dams.

"We have had situations where the South Africans did not warn us in time they were going to do discharges, with an interval of only two days," Suzana Laforte, head of Mozambique's water board, told the independent local paper Savanna.

Meanwhile, because of a lack of funds and expertise, the Maputo government is struggling to build and maintain its own infrastructure, which is paramount to preventing future floods.

Between 2009 and 2011 the resource-rich but impoverished nation channelled just $275 million toward efforts to reduce disaster risk, while international donors gave an additional $317 million.

Two new dams in critical areas on the Incomati and Limpopo rivers would cost $1.1 billion (805 million euros). An additional $200 million is needed for upgrades to urban drainage systems, according to Laforte.

"A lot has been done, but it's not sufficient," Castro said. "There is a need for a huge amount of effort to build dykes, dams and roads."

A UN report last week found that a damaged dyke that is in need of $27 million in repairs was "one of the main issues that prompted the worsening" of the floods in Chokwe.

Aid groups' ability to respond quickly to emergencies also remains an issue.

Tents, water and food have been provided to victims of last week's deluge, but more shelter and sanitation is needed.

"The lesson from this flood in Mozambique is that early warning is not enough," Matheou said. "More pre-positioning of stocks and shelter planning was needed. That should be introduced before this is referred to

as a model for replication."

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