



Albert Tevoedjre
President
African Centre for Social Prospects
Benin

Albert Tevoedjre is the President of the African Centre for Social Prospects, a non-profit institute in Porto Novo, Benin dedicated to research, training and implementation of socioeconomic development programmes in Africa. Among its many activities, in 1989 the Centre hosted a meeting on human rights, organized with the Council of Europe and the Organization of African Unity.

He is currently a Deputy of the National Assembly of Benin, and is President of the Committee of Foreign Affairs. He has served as Minister of Information, Benin. He also was Deputy Director-General of the International Labour Organization in Geneva.

A professor of political science, he has written extensively about political, social and economic development in Africa. He has lectured at Georgetown University, USA, the African Institute of Geneva, Switzerland and has conducted research at Harvard University, USA.

Member of several international academic societies, Professor Tevoedjre is the recipient of various awards, including the International Humanitarian Medal and the Medal of the Council of Europe. In addition, he has just been selected for the 1995 Raoul Follereau Prize. He is a member of the Scientific and Technical Committee of the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

Disaster Management in Africa: A Social Responsibility

A glance at the number of natural disasters and complex emergencies in Africa reflects the depth of human tragedy in that continent. Yet when disaster occurs, both Africans and the international community are often taken by surprise. African leaders must take the initiative to accept emergency management as a responsibility on a par with socioeconomic development. In addition, African reference centres are needed in order to encourage local training and dissemination of information.

Africa is a vast continent with more than 50 countries that differ in size, resources and living conditions. It is known to the world as the land of extreme poverty. In recent years, the droughts, famines, conflicts and political upheavals of Africa have been constantly in the headlines.

Any generalization may appear hasty or exaggerated. But the fact is that all the African states are faced with an economic and social situation that gives cause for concern. More than ever before, the 1980s have been a decade of regression, marked by a series of recurrent crises without precedent. During this period Africa has gone into a steep internal economic and social decline, while becoming increasingly marginalized in the outside world.

The harsh consequences of this crisis have been compounded by a variety of disasters and tragedies. Floods, drought, swarms of migrating locusts ... nature has spared nothing. Man has added civil wars, ethnic violence and intolerance. Driven out by one or other of these factors, refugees and displaced populations can now be counted in millions in Africa.

No state is safe from these disasters which may strike at any time, on top of the vagaries of politics, economic difficulties and environmental degradation.

If we look at a map of Africa showing the risks of various disasters, we can see that no country is spared. If we add to this map, a second map with the complex emergencies of today and the disasters likely to be imminent, the situation takes on real urgency and reflects the depth of the human tragedy in that continent.

■ Disaster Response: a scene of confusion

An example in a country like Benin, violent tornados and torrential rains produce situations on a disaster scale every year or two. Thousands are left homeless, many places are flooded, especially the country's capital, Cotonou. Many are left dead, especially children. Traffic comes to a standstill for weeks. The stagnant water remains a permanent source of serious and contagious diseases. In spite of the frequency of this flooding, people are still wondering what steps should be taken.

A second case, it is well known that, since 1959 at least, ethnic tensions periodically erupt into massacres in countries

such as Rwanda and Burundi. The events of last year and this year in that region are in all our minds, with thousands of deaths and innumerable refugees. And yet we are still taken by surprise!

If we look at the scenario typical of disaster in an African country, we see that:

- These countries, and in particular the local communities at risk, have not taken advantage of periods of peace and development to introduce preventive measures aimed at mitigating the risks or preparations to cope with emergencies. Yet they realize that they will receive no help for at least the first 24 hours following the disaster, the critical time for saving lives and providing medical relief;
- The authorities, once aware of the situation, direct their efforts towards mobilizing international aid, since they have no statutory relief plan, no specific intersectoral

arrangements and no crisis management tools at their disposal to limit the impact of the disaster at an early stage;

- The generally ad hoc approach, with haphazard delivery of international aid, little or no coordination between the various bodies, and with no in-country coordination system managed by people with experience in crisis management, exacerbates the confusion at the scene of the disaster and compounds its adverse effects;
- NGOs, virtually absent from the scene in normal times, spring up when a disaster occurs and pursue diverging aims amidst the confusion in the public sector. Their amateurism, due to lack of experience and expertise, is a further complicating factor;
- Competition for humanitarian aid resources among the various bodies involved - public sector agencies,

*Tragedy in
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Photo: WHO M. Bührer

international NGOs and other international bodies, and new, local NGOs - completes the overall picture of chaos.

■ Perspectives and recommendations

In this context, it would be inappropriate to focus exclusively on the role of African NGOs for the simple reason that current realities and practice in Africa prevent such organizations from playing a considered role within an overall plan

The problem we are trying to highlight is beyond the capacity of the voluntary sector to solve on its own, and has to do in the first place with the responsibility of leaders. We are heartened to note that our heads of state and governments declared in Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery (1986) that

the development of our continent is first and foremost the responsibility of our governments and our peoples. It is therefore time for action and for a change in attitude. We share the determination of our heads of state, when they stress in that declaration that "external contributions can only serve to support our own efforts and should not be the mainstay of our action." This is the path we must follow.

All countries in Africa, and local communities in particular, must first of all realize that disaster management is one of their main responsibilities and one which requires the same level of preparation and planning as socioeconomic development.

The success and effectiveness of disaster management in reducing risks and limiting their repercussions should come to be seen as one of the objectives of sustainable development.

The countries of Africa must together develop policies and

