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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Thar drought: A complete public health failure


KEYWORDS

Drought;
Public health;
Thar;
Pakistan

Dear Editor,

Less than average rainfall for two consecutive years in Tharparker, also called Thar, Pakistan, has resulted in famine-like conditions, which have adversely affected health in the entire region [1]. Moreover, the government's inappropriate response to this calamity has immensely aggravated the situation, with the current death toll at 470, including over 300 children under the age of 7, primarily because of malnutrition [2].

Severe malnourishment and deficiency of proper basic health facilities in the region is the major contributor towards this high death toll. Undernourished mothers are not receiving the required nutrients necessary for pregnancy and lactation, which in turn affects child growth and development [3]. Therefore, many children exhibit signs of wasting and marasmus [4]. Due to their inadequate diet, these children are particularly vulnerable to myriad infections, such as pneumonia and gastroenteritis, which are eventually fatal [3]. Suicide also plays a role in this high death toll because poverty-stricken parents kill themselves and their children because of their failure to provide adequate food [5].

As discussed above, Thar suffers from a dearth of quality healthcare. Most of the region is underdeveloped and lacks proper hospitals. The few hospitals/basic healthcare units that exist are extremely understaffed [6]. According to one report, 110 dispensaries, 1 trauma center and one maternity home are non-functional in the region due to staff shortages. Corruption and embezzlement have further strained this inadequate system.

The same report also noted that Rs. 50 million (USD 500,000) that was allocated from the provincial budget to improve the healthcare system had been used to buy furniture for various officers [2]. The result is that Tharis die from easily treatable infections [7]. Corruption is not just restricted to the health sector. According to the relief-inspecting judge for Tharparker, relief goods worth millions of Rupees, including wheat, have been misappropriated. Although the culprits for this crime have been identified, little action has been taken against them [8].

To address this public health nightmare, the government of Sindh needs to act on a war footing. In the short term, an adequate number of doctors, veterinarians, nurses and other medical/paramedical must be immediately transferred to various health units in the drought-stricken region. The current mishandling of relief goods and funds must also be stopped, and mechanisms for their proper distribution must be devised and implemented immediately. Finally, individuals responsible for corruption must be adequately dealt with [8]. Only then can this disaster be properly managed, before it truly spirals out of control.

Conflict of interest

Funding: No funding sources.

Competing interests: None declared.

Ethical approval: Not required.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jiph.2015.01.004>

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30 December 2014

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