

PRESS RELEASE

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ATT: News Editors

CHOLERA OUTBREAK

The Mail and Guardian article (30/01/09), headlined "Don't Blame Zim for Cholera", presents the impression that The Mvula Trust believes that the cholera outbreak in South Africa is unconnected to the epidemic in Zimbabwe, but is rather a result of municipal services delivery failure.

While The Mvula Trust welcomes the public attention on water quality that the cholera crisis has sparked, we caution against oversimplifying the causes and spread of this waterborne disease.

Epidemiological evidence points clearly to many of the cases of cholera reported in Limpopo, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal being directly linked to the Zimbabwe epidemic. On the other hand recent cases reported at Matekwane hospital near Hazyview in Mpumalanga have been identified as the result of a different strain of cholera and traced back to a contaminated reservoir. Cholera is endemic to many parts of South Africa, and given the right conditions outbreaks occur.

It is commonly accepted that about 4 million South Africans do not have access to treated drinking water. This is despite the significant efforts by local governments to reduce the water and sanitation backlog. (In 1990 18 million South Africans had no access to safe water and sanitation). This group is particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as cholera. This risk is increased when wastewater treatment works discharge effluent into rivers that is not properly treated.

The cholera crisis highlights the urgent need for access to safe drinking water for all South Africans. It also demands urgent investment and building the capacity to manage South Africa's water treatment facilities, particularly in small towns. Mvula is working together with municipalities, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and international agencies to tackle this situation with a sustainable and holistic response. We urge the media and the public to engage and support municipalities to find solutions to improving water quality in their catchments.

We would like to remind the public that cholera is spread in two ways, through contact with contaminated water, as well as through contact with infected people. It is possible therefore to contract cholera, despite safe water supplies. This brings into focus the need for all in South Africa to practice safe hygiene: Washing hands after using the toilet, or dealing with human waste or food and washing hands before eating or feeding children.

The Mvula Trust has been working closely with municipalities for the past 15 years to address water and sanitation backlogs in vulnerable communities, in order to address the systemic causes of waterborne diseases.

Issued by:

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