

The role and adequacy of disaster management unit within the South African Municipalities

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Keywords

Disaster, Disaster Management, National Disaster Management Centre, Municipalities

Abstract

This paper evaluates the role of municipalities in disaster management and its adequacy in handling the disaster management problems and challenges. It is argued in this paper that despite the existence of the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) within the three spheres of government, South Africa is still among countries that are at risk of wide range of natural disaster such as floods, drought, fire and manmade disasters such as misuse of technology, transitions in cultural practice and lack of awareness and information which causes damage or harm to the society at large. However, it is argued that disasters which are natural are not preventable, but disaster management strategies such as prevention, mitigation, preparedness, and response can be put in place within institutions to ensure that all citizens are able to respond to any possible disasters which may occur. The Methodology followed in this paper is qualitative in the sense that secondary sources are used to argue about the adequacy of Disaster Management Unit capacity in South African municipalities to handle disaster problems. The question that remains to be answered in this paper is: Does the Disaster Management Units as established within South African municipalities have the means to ensure planning and preparation for emergencies and protection against possible disasters which may occur in their setting.

The argument in this paper is based on the assumption that disasters may happen at any time and consequently affect vulnerable rural people than those who reside within urban areas. This in essence means that South African municipalities are still faced with major challenges in addressing disaster related issues particularly in rural areas. It is also argued that municipalities struggle to put in place their disaster management plans which includes the assignment of primary and secondary responsibilities for priority disaster risks posing a threat in their municipalities. This paper, therefore, conclude that the existence of the Disaster Management Units in improving disaster management are inadequate in functions and it is recommended that possible awareness campaigns that can help rural people to respond in terms of emergencies that can lead to disasters be commenced.

Introduction

Disasters are said to have imposed a heavy cost in human material and physical resources and damage to the environment globally (Rupp, 2012:1). Such disasters represent a potential significant obstacle to economic growth and development throughout the globe. In South Africa disasters such as poverty, population growth and rapid urbanisation are commonly known as causal factors contributing to problems which affect both the government of the day and private organisations in different ways. It is argued therefore that most countries are ill-prepared when coming to such types of disasters. To prevent such disasters, adequate procedures to deal with disaster situations and relief measures must be planned prior to the event together with strong legislation to empower those who are responsible to carry out their tasks given to them. Thus, South Africa has established the *National Disaster Management Framework of 2005* and *Disaster Management Act, (Act no 57 of 2002)* which recognises the wide-ranging opportunities in South Africa to avoid and reduce disaster losses through the concerted energies and efforts of all spheres of government, civil society and private sector organisations.

The existence of the above-mentioned piece of legislation should therefore bring about change on problems of disaster related issues in the country and ensure an adequate procedure to deal with disaster

events in the country. Uys (2005:404), however, acknowledged that disasters in South Africa have been historically managed in an uncoordinated manner, which leaves it prone to lack of proper management. This can be argued from the concept of disaster management perspective, because according to *Disaster Management Act, 2002*, the concept is clearly defined as a continuous and integrated multisectoral and multidisciplinary process of planning and implementation of measures aimed at addressing the four disaster elements namely, disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness response, recovery and rehabilitation (van Niekerk; 2006:98). Without any of the above-mentioned disaster strategies, disastrous situations in the country may continue to be managed in an uncoordinated manner. Furthermore Uys, (2005) pointed out on the complexity of disaster management due to its multidisciplinary and multi-institutional functions and argue that disaster management usually compromises a number of interventions and actions that may be occurring simultaneously and not always in phased succession. In addressing the purpose of this paper, the paper is outlined as follows: to describe the legislative frameworks governing municipalities in carrying out their task in disaster risk management, giving an overview of the role of the disaster management unit in the South African municipalities, common challenges facing municipalities in addressing disaster situation and the adequacy of South African municipalities in dealing with disaster Management.

Legislative frameworks governing municipalities in carrying out task in disaster management

The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, places a legal obligation on the government of South Africa to ensure the health of both personal and environmental and safety of its citizens at large (Zuma, Luyt, Chirenda, & Tandlich, 2012). In terms of this (section 41(1) (b) of the Constitution, all spheres of government are required to “secure the well-being of the people of the Republic”. Section 152(1) (d) also requires that local government must “ensure a safe and healthy environment”. Therefore, in essence the primary responsibility for disaster risk management in South Africa rests with government at all spheres. Section 26(g) of the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, as well as sections 25 and 53 of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 compels each municipal entity to develop a disaster risk management plan as part of and an integrated part of their Integrated Development Plans (IDP). This emphasis that all municipalities must prepare their disaster management plans in accordance with the requirements of the Disaster Management Act of 2002 and section 26(g) of the Municipal Systems Act of 2000.

The National Disaster Management Framework of 2005 (NDMF) also requires the establishment of the National Disaster Centre (NDMC) responsible for promoting integrated and coordinated national disaster risk management policy. The framework gives explicit priority to the application of the principle of cooperative governance for the purpose of disaster risk management and emphasises the involvement of all stakeholders in strengthening the capabilities of national, provincial and municipal organs of the state to reduce the likelihood and severity of disasters. In essence the framework calls for the establishment of arrangements for cooperation with international role players and countries in the region to address disaster situation. In terms of the establishment of the above legislation, the NDMC is therefore legally instructed to ensure the means to proper planning and preparation for emergencies and protection against possible disaster which may occur in the country.

An overview of the role of disaster management unit in south Africa

Since the proclamation of the Disaster Management Act of 2002 ten years ago, the South African municipalities still fails to comply with the full legal requirements of its implementation (Wentink and Van Der Merwe, 2017) and therefore the effective implementation of the act becomes difficult. Historically the Disaster Management Act of 2002 is regarded as the cornerstone of disaster management in South Africa. The Act provides disaster management officials with a new focus on disaster management issues. It presents new challenges in not only negotiating and writing up disaster management plans, but also in developing management plans for general public scrutiny. However, one can argue that since the disaster management concept provides four common elements namely, disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and rehabilitation which are regarded the most important elements to reduce risk. Disaster risk management as an activity of all spheres of government relates to an integrated,

multi-disciplinary approach aimed at reducing the risk associated with hazards and vulnerability (SALGA;2011).

The responsibilities of disaster management in South Africa are a decentralised function to the sphere of government hierarchy in an integrated manner (Van Niekerk, 2014). It is established as a public sector function within each sphere of government, but disaster risk management goes beyond pure line function responsibility. Despite its establishment the disaster management unit challenges to address risk in the country is burdened in the municipalities because they are closer to the people at local level. Further to that the Disaster Management Act of South Africa places the largest responsibility of disaster assessment and management on local government (Local Government Seta, 2014:10). Although other spheres of government are accorded same responsibilities, but lack of budgets and other resource relevant limitations makes implementation difficult (Cherish and Wright,2019). The success of Disaster Management Act plan could be dependent on collaborative efforts between the private sector, civil society, non-governmental organisations and research institutes (Nkabane and Nzimankwe,2017). It is indeed significant to engage diverse stakeholders in disaster risk management to ensure proper achievement of good results and policy implementation (Setas, Reyers, Gundit, Nel and Ester, 2016).

Challenges of disaster management in the south African municipalities

Disasters are generally defined as unprepared events which occurs in an unexpected manner, which often triggers haphazard reactions (South Africa, 1998). South Africa is suffering from a high magnitude of increasing hazards such as drought, epidemics, water shortage, floods, fires, social unrest and storms (Kunguma, 2020:1) and hence such has an increasing impact on human lives (Wentink and Van Niekerk, 2017). It is the role of each municipality to prepare a Disaster Management Plan as stipulated in Section 52(1) (a) of the Disaster Management Act of 2002, as part of its Integrated Development Plan (IDP) to enhance service delivery to avoid any disasters that may occur in the country. However, many South African municipalities are still facing challenges to put in place the principles of Disaster Management outlined in the Green Paper on Disaster Management. Sokupa (2012:1) emphasis that many municipalities have a huge challenge in developing a disaster management plan which accommodates all stakeholders and the community, and which reduce any disaster threat that may occur. Whether a disaster is major or minor, of national or local proportion, it is the people at the community or village level who suffer its adverse effects. Therefore, a common characteristic relevant to all disasters and crisis is that decisions must be made quickly. Roth & Becker (2011:443) acknowledged that South Africa is still facing challenges to protect the life of its citizens, property. The existing infrastructure and the environment from disasters that are emerging daily. However South Africa has since established a National Disaster Management Framework of 2005, which focuses on disaster risk reduction. Despite the introduction of the framework there are still challenges in most South African municipalities when coming to manage disasters particularly at local level. The most common challenges in the country include among others; poverty, information management related to communication and awareness, financial challenges, lack of community participation and lack of involvement of other government departments in disaster risk management. This paper documented the following challenges complicating the disaster risk management particularly at local government level.

Poverty

In developing country such as South Africa, poor people tend to be the most vulnerable to environmental disturbance because they do not have enough resources to help them to cope with disaster situations. Poverty in South Africa is a disaster, and it is the widening gap between the rich and the poor, rural and urban incomes that contributes to poverty and cause people to be vulnerable to certain disasters. Increasing rapid population also remains a challenge to many South African municipalities.

In South Africa rural communities are the most vulnerable to disaster because of their inability to cope with their weak socio-economic conditions (Zamisa and Mutereko, 2018). It is widely known that in South Africa many people rely on government social grants to survive and that almost 2.4 million of young people between the ages of 18-25 in South Africa are unemployed. This will result in the increased number of illiteracies, crime rate, and the spread of HIV/AIDS diseases in most local communities, and it is only through quality education where people can improve their living condition and escape poverty

(Coetzee, Lourens, Nel & van der Westhuizen; 2007). However, there are many reasons behind poverty levels in South Africa, but one of the most reasons is the increasing amount of unemployment. Hence the issue of poverty in most local communities remain a critical challenge for most local municipalities to manage crisis and disasters that result in poverty and unemployment. South Africa is affected by poor socio-economic conditions realities with the highest population in informal settlements (Stauton, Swanepoel and Labuschaine, 2020). About 38% of the population is concentrated on a 2% land (Zuma and Luyt, 2012), resulting in potential uncontrolled disaster if something unexpected occur in the area.

Information management, Communication and awareness

It is through effective information management and good communication of disasters where people can reduce the risk of disasters of any kind that may occur (Igglesden, Monson & Polzer; 2009: 90). Information should be spread to the people, so that they can be aware of any possible disaster that may occur and that could save many lives of the people through early warnings. There are still local people who do not have access to information and such people are vulnerable to disasters. It is the responsibility of the National Disaster Management Centre and other stakeholders to provide better media coverage to all the South Africans in order to reduce disasters of any kind. In most municipalities there is still lack of communication of different stakeholders and disaster management officials at national, provincial and local level is of vital importance to avoid disasters. The disaster management must communicate with the local community in order to come up with innovative ideas, including tapping into indigenous knowledge systems on how to prevent and mitigate the impact of disasters.

Political disparities

The issue of land reform in most local communities and in South Africa as a whole still remain a debatable topic. There are differences between the government and the community with regard to the issue of land use. Other local communities prefer to occupy their land while the government might want the land to be used for development purposes, for instances community facilities such as schools, libraries and community centres may be implemented for development purposes.

Financial challenges

South Africa is still among other countries faced with lack of budgeting and access to funding following disaster occurrences. There is allocation of funds gaps between the national, provincial and local level. Provision and maintenance of infrastructure at local level requires adequate funds. However, communicates are also contributing to financial challenges, because they often refuse to pay for any services that they receive, citing low efficiency levels and lack of affordability. When following a disaster that has occurred, disaster management units are faced with challenges of reconstruction due to lack of funds.

Lack of community participation

Community participation has been widely acknowledged as the additional element in disaster management necessary to reverse the worldwide trend of exponential increase in disaster occurrence of and loss from small- and medium- scale disasters, build s culture of safety and ensure sustainable development for all. However, in most rural area's community participation remains a critical challenge and affects municipalities in complying with the Disaster Management Act. Local community participation should be taken as the primary focus of attention in disaster reduction because it is the lack of disaster management communication which has an influence on leadership decision making regarding response and relief.

The adequacy of South African Municipalities in dealing with disaster management

South Africa is noted to be a country vulnerable to disasters. The country has organised national disaster risk management based on national, provincial and municipal disaster centres and advisory forums (Tredea, Coetzee and Rautenbach, 2020). Although the systems of South Africa in terms of disaster management looks so perfect and setup, the inability to implement the act remains difficult. One of the challenges of the Disaster Management Act Implementation Act in South Africa became when President Ramaphosa declared the State of Emergency on COVID 19 pandemic. Indeed, the emergence of the pandemic revealed the inadequacies of the Disaster management Act in South Africa (Kunguma, 2021).

The uncontrollable spread of the various and the deadly impact it caused to the society showed the South African public that it failed to curb the spread of the pandemic within a reasonable time frame. Despite systematic problems in the administration of municipalities to afford the function, there are budgetary limitations and human resources capital to deal effectively with disaster related issues in South African municipalities. In order for South African municipalities to afford the functions of disaster management within their locality, there is a need to deal with systematic problems, resources issues and training of officials.

Conclusion

This paper evaluated the role of municipalities in disaster management and its adequacy in handling the disaster management problems and challenges. It has been argued in this paper that despite the existence of the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) within the three spheres of government, South Africa is still among countries that are at risk of wide range of natural disaster such as floods, drought, fire and manmade disasters such as misuse of technology, transitions in cultural practice and lack of awareness and information which causes damage or harm to the society at large. Some of the identified cause of the failure to implement the Disaster Management Act effectively are lack of human and capital resources as well as systemic administrative problems. This paper, therefore, concluded that the existence of the Disaster Management Units in improving disaster management are inadequate in functions and it is recommended that possible awareness campaigns that can help rural people to respond in terms of emergencies that can lead to disasters be commenced as soon as possible, that there should be capacity building programmes to improve stakeholder collaboration and understanding by all stakeholders about disaster management and response.

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