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## **An autoethnography of disaster response work with low-income communities in KZN: Implications for Afrocentric social work**

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### **Abstract**

The province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, is no stranger to adversities. Between 2020 and 2022, KZN faced overlapping disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic, episodes of looting and catastrophic

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floods. These disasters had multifaceted consequences for low-income communities. During the disasters, social work academics/practitioners provided psycho-social support to communities while working with a community engagement research centre, the MA'AT Institute, located at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Adopting an autoethnographic methodology, we provide insights into the experiences of working in low-income communities during disasters. Based on these reflections, we suggest that social workers should often adopt a culturally sensitive approach to disaster response, poverty alleviation and the protection of human rights. We further highlight the complexities of community engagement in disaster-stricken areas when attempting to meet specific goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as no poverty, zero hunger and climate action. We call for adopting an Afrocentric and culturally responsive approach to strengthen the resilience of low-income communities in the face of disaster-related adversity.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, Afrocentric social work, COVID-19, disasters, floods, poverty programme

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province has experienced numerous disasters that indiscriminately affected communities. These disasters disproportionately affected low-income communities against the backdrop of pre-existing poverty, psycho-social challenges and unemployment, *inter alia*. This paper is grounded on three disasters that recently affected the province simultaneously, namely: COVID-19, looting and the 2022 KZN floods. Numerous researchers have revealed that the impact of disasters further worsens and increases vulnerability among the poor and marginalised (Bouchard et al., 2023; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2014; Makhanya & Mzinyane, 2024).

During disasters, social workers are often required to serve among the frontliners who offer services to destitute individuals, families and communities requiring emergency psycho-social services, including trauma counselling, social assistance, and emergency placements. (Koketso et al.,

2021). According to Bouchard et al. (2023), the 2022 KZN floods were among the deadliest natural disasters to strike South Africa in the twenty-first century and the deadliest flood since 1987. Scholars such as Dominelli (2012) and Willett (2019) argue that disasters have intensified in the last 25 years, causing more long-term disruption, necessitating finances for social welfare needs and recovery, and claiming more victims. As described above, the period between 2020 and 2022 marked several disasters that further uncovered the depth of poverty and psycho-social ills within the KZN province.

Given this background, we adopt collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a research method and the Afrocentric theory to reflect on our community engagement experiences and lessons learned during the disasters. Through our reflections, we argue that disasters had multifaceted consequences for implementing poverty programs in low-income communities. Furthermore, we illuminate the nexus between Afrocentric social work, poverty, community engagement and disaster management. Our reflections also reveal the complexities of community engagement in disaster-stricken areas while attempting to meet certain goals of the SDGs, such as no poverty, zero hunger and climate action.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, we adopt the Afrocentric theory, which emphasises the centrality of African perspective, principles, values, and cultural heritage, including, but not limited to, the indigenous knowledge system (Asante, 1980). In the context of disaster response and poverty alleviation, an Afrocentric lens involves recognising the historical, cultural, psycho-social and socio-economic dimensions that influence the experiences of communities.

At the centre of this theory is the principle of *ubuntu*, which emphasises interconnectedness. *Ubuntu* challenges the Western individualistic disaster response models, emphasising the crucial role of community networks and collective action in building resilience (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). As such, our reflective accounts in the later section below indicate the interconnectedness

we experienced and implemented as we engaged communities during overlapping disasters. The sentimental work of Mbiti (1970) reveals that: “what happens to the individual, happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group, community or country happens to the individual”. Additionally, *Ubuntu* emphasises the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Chigangaidze, 2021; Makhanya & Mzinyane, 2023). Hence, Raditloaneng and Chawawa (2015) criticise the Euro-American-centric styles of development that narrowly focus on poverty alleviation without acknowledging the multi-dimensional impact of disaster on communities.

As we discuss the complexities of overlapping disasters and their implication for social work and poverty alleviation, this theory provided an appropriate theoretical foundation that embraced the richness of African cultures and practices, acknowledging historical injustices while empowering communities to be active agents in their resilience and social development.

### **Methodology**

Through an Afrocentric lens, collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is herein adopted as a conceptualisation method. This method allowed us to, subjectively and critically, reflect and/or tell a story about our lived experiences of the overlapping disasters in KZN. This research method will enable authors to reflect on their lived realities through a self-represented lens without external interpretation. As a result, this is arguably aligned with Afrocentric theory because storytelling, as a way of knowledge production, is an ancient African way of knowledge preservation and communication from one generation to the next. We also argue the alignment of CAE with Afrocentrism because it is based on the values of collaboration and interconnectedness.

With the same tone, Wall (2006) also aligns CAE with the post-modernism theory, which posits that there is no universal truth and ways of generating knowledge. Similarly, Afrocentrism is advancing the unique ontologies and epistemologies and embraces indigenous ways of African science

communication. This qualitative method was useful when discussing the confluence of disasters that affected the province of KZN. It also provided significant lessons and critical questions about the nexus of disaster, poverty and community engagement through a social work lens.

Motlounge and Mzinyane (2023) investigated the building blocks of CAE, namely (1) collaboration, (2) autobiography, and (3) ethnography. Similarly, Chang et al. (2013) argue that combining these three building blocks in the name ‘collaborative autoethnography’ is ‘oxymoronic’ because of each building block’s contradictory or diverse meaning. This contradictory meaning in the etymology of ‘collaborative autoethnography’ is clarified by Ngcobo et al. (2023). In their explanation, these authors argue that the term collaborative is self-explanatory as it may be synonymous with terms such as collective or cooperation. Additionally, they state that “autobiography— [is] the study of self-experiences”, while ethnography— [is] a study of habits and culture” (Ngcobo et al., 2023).

It is noteworthy that ‘autoethnography’ [without the term collaborative] is a combination of two of the latter-mentioned building blocks, and numerous researchers have constantly criticised it for its alleged lack of rigour (cf. Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Wall, 2006). Currently, CAE [including the term collaborative] is an extension of autoethnography. Ngcobo et al. (2023) cited Chang et al. (2013), who, according to these authors, added the term ‘collaborative’ in the diverse genre of autoethnographies. Chang et al. argue that the addition of ‘collaborative’ to autoethnography attempted to strengthen the rigour of the method and shifted it from being individualistic towards a comparative, consultative and joint genre of autoethnography, which promotes communal ways of knowledge production. Additionally, several authors, including Anderson (2006), Chang et al. (2013), and Ngcobo et al. (2023), have attempted to intellectualise this research method; they argue that CAE should follow specific steps and rules during its execution.

Likewise, in this conceptualisation and write-up process, we also followed the steps that were designed by Chang et al. (2013), which include (1) Preliminary Data Collection (PDC phase), (2) Subsequent Data Collection

(SDC phase), (3) Data Analysis and Interpretation (DAI), (4) Collaborative Report Writing (CRW). According to Chang et al. (2013) and Ngcobo et al. (2023), each step has multiple activities that must unfold.

During the PDC phase, collaborative autoethnographers are expected to self-reflect individually about an event they hope to write about (Chang et al., 2013). Secondly, during the PDC phase, authors should engage in ‘group sharing’ and ‘exploration’ of their personal experiences (Chang et al., 2013). Following a similar pattern, we also commenced individual writing, reflecting on our involvement in the overlapping disasters that affected the KZN province. Upon exploration and group sharing, it became clear that only three authors out of eight worked directly with communities during the overlapping disasters. We thus jointly decided to use the reflections of three authors, whom we judged to be relevant during the group sharing and exploration. This adaptation of the PDC phase was necessary as the authors needed to protect the integrity and honesty of reflections. As a result, other authors also played a crucial role as they were involved in the literature search and review, conceptualisation, critical reading and write-up processes of different sections of the paper, excluding the reflections.

During the SDC phase, as Chang et al. (2013) described, authors are expected to continue with individual writing, group sharing and meaning-making. Accordingly, the three designated authors who compiled the reflections continued with individual writing, sharing their reflections and sharing them with a wider group for robust and critical feedback. Through this phase, the designated reflectors were able to make meaning. This process is described by Ngcobo et al. (2023) as ‘the Circular Iterative Process of Collaborative Autoethnography’.

The circular, iterative process continued, where the designated reflectors engaged in data analysis and interpretation (DAI phase). During this phase, all authors collectively delved into the synthesis of the reflections, where critical issues were discussed and meaning made. During this process, lessons were drawn regarding the nexus between community engagement, poverty programmes and overlapping disasters within an African context.

## Literature Study

The nexus between poverty and disasters

Poverty alleviation and disasters have been/or are a sustained concern for the world for many years. As a result, in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced by the United Nations (UN) to advance the global community towards sustainable livelihoods across a variety of social, economic, environmental, and health spheres. As Vision 2030, SDGs aim to encourage climate action, eradicate poverty and hunger, improve people's health and well-being, and build a sustainable environment (Lee et al., 2020). As a significant part of the world's ecosystems, the natural environment is essential to human survival.

Considering the ongoing instability of the climate, Narloch and Bangalore (2018) reveal that poor communities are at high risk of environmental degradation and are often the ones most impacted by climate change. For those who live in poverty, especially in rural areas, the natural environment is their main source of livelihood. Hence, their dependence is more pronounced (Narloch & Bangalore, 2018). Due to their excessive reliance on natural resources and ecosystems, which can exacerbate ecosystem fragility and environmental risks, the poor frequently live in confined, vulnerable places with significant environmental dangers (Barbier, 2010). Nonetheless, there is often an unequal distribution of environmental pollution, influenced by socio-economic, geographic, and climatic factors. This capitalistic trend of industrialisation and its associated pollution often results in disproportionate geographical hazards, marginalisation, fragility and poverty traps that majorly affect poorer communities (*bid*). According to Narloch and Bangalore (2018), those dealing with poverty and its associated social ills are typically less able to handle shocks and are, therefore, more susceptible to the effects of climate change and disaster. Thus, reflecting on the processes of engaging already impoverished communities is crucial for developing strategies and policies to reduce poverty in the face of climate change and disaster.

### South Africa and disasters: Implications for poverty programmes

South Africa has been prone to experiencing disasters in the past two decades, adversely affecting the environment, population, and economy. Rentschler (2013) asserts that the spike in disasters in magnitude and frequency has caused significant economic and human capital losses, affecting poor and vulnerable households and individuals. Hlahla et al. (2016) explain that South Africa is “unique in that although it is categorised as middle-income, it is grappling with high levels of poverty and inequality which have been inherited from a history of colonialism and climate variability aggravates the stresses, making it more difficult to rectify the injustices of the past”. Vhumbunu (2021) reveals that the 2021 looting and rioting, in the province, were caused by the fact that “[c]itizens were frustrated by worsening poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and inequality due to the COVID-19-induced national lockdown measures”.

As argued earlier, this article focuses on three prominent disasters recently devastated KwaZulu-Natal: flooding, COVID-19, and looting. These overlapping events exacerbated existing poverty and hindered KwaZulu-Natal's economic recovery. According to Ngcobo et al. (2023), poverty programmes have also been affected.

The COVID-19 pandemic, first detected in China in 2019, reached the shores of South Africa in March 2020. The government implemented nationwide lockdowns to curb its spread, significantly disrupting various societal aspects (Arashi et al., 2021). Beyond its impact on health, the pandemic affected healthcare systems, social welfare services, and daily life (Masuku et al., 2022; Ngcobo et al., 2023; Spinelli & Pellino, 2020). Restricted movement and interactions posed novel challenges, and the resulting job losses (particularly the 32.6% unemployment rate) exacerbated poverty and contributed to the 2021 and 2022 looting unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng (Maluleke et al., 2021).

In July 2021, South Africa witnessed widespread looting unrest in major economic hubs such as KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Defined as the forceful appropriation of property intending to plunder valuables, looting



encompasses robbery, theft, and unauthorised appropriation of goods (Stevenson, 2010; Majoko & Dudu, 2023; Shabalala, 2023). It is a criminal offence often associated with vandalism and destruction (Shabalala, 2023). In KwaZulu-Natal, businesses and shops were ransacked, further hindering economic recovery efforts already strained by the pandemic and exacerbating unemployment and household income losses (National Treasury, 2021).

Globally, the frequency and intensity of floods are projected to increase due to climate change (Woldemeskel & Sharma, 2016; Udo & Naidu, 2023). South Africa, particularly KwaZulu-Natal, has recently faced recurrent flood disasters, with eThekweni municipality being a hotspot (Udo & Naidu, 2023). The April 2019 and 2022 floods, triggered by torrential rainfall, were particularly devastating, claiming lives, destroying infrastructure, and displacing thousands. Often home to low-income populations, informal settlements were disproportionately affected (Grab & Nash, 2023; Udo & Naidu, 2023). These events necessitated the declaration of a national disaster state and significant financial interventions by the government (Udo & Naidu, 2023). The April 2022 floods alone affected almost 18,000 households and 122,000 individuals, damaging essential infrastructure like health facilities and roads (Udo & Naidu, 2023). At least 425 lives were lost during the April 2022 floods (Jewkes et al., 2023). Flood disasters further exacerbate societal gender issues and imbalances. For instance, previous literature reports that local women in flood-prone areas often bear the heaviest burden of these disasters as they are exposed to high-risk displacement, inappropriate police conduct or limited police presence (Jewkes et al., 2023; Thurston et al., 2021).

These disasters had multifaceted consequences for the communities, particularly the poor households and communities, with women and children bearing the most. In the study conducted by Matlakala et al. (2021), findings reveal that women, as the custodians of families in South Africa, particularly in rural areas where patriarchy is prominent, are often left in dispute in the instances of disasters and have to remain at home and be victims of domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and other societal problems. On the other hand, findings revealed that children, as defined by the Children Act 38 of

2005 during the occurrence of disasters, experience these disasters similar to other people as they also experience trauma and PTSD (Matlakala et al., 2021).

#### Locating South Africa in the management of disasters

South Africa is one of the progressive countries first to legislate disaster comprehensively (risk) management (Vermaak & Van Niekerk, 2004). “Yet, a review of the implementation of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 and Framework within the South African public sector reveals that significant discrepancies exist between the ideals espoused in the legislation and the realities within government” (Van Niekerk, 2014, p. 859). Moreover, the lack of preparedness to address the aftermath of disasters, compounded by the lack of resources and the consequences of overcrowded shelters, necessitates assessing the effectiveness of South Africa’s Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002. As Van Niekerk (2014) states, the ideals of disaster risk management cannot be achieved without structures to support the myriad of actions involved. During disasters, families and communities affected not only have to endure the trauma and devastation of loss but also must adjust to living arrangements that expose vulnerable populations such as children to malnutrition, neglect, and abuse. While this is so, social work practitioners not only have to provide social relief but also prioritise children's welfare when responding to disasters. However, little is still understood about the challenges social workers face when providing care and support to survivors of disasters.

According to Woods (2014: 96), “For disaster management, social work is well located at the nexus between governance and communities to promote and facilitate resilience, which is now embedded in national disaster management policy”. Similarly, Ngcobo et al. (2023) argue that during a disaster, the primary roles of social workers are relief and assistance, restoration, resettlement, and resilience building. While this is true, some studies reveal that social workers lack the necessary education and training to assist victims and survivors of natural disasters. However, the

autoethnographic reflections provide insights into our experiences navigating social services amidst disasters.

### **Reflections: Engaging poverty-stricken communities during disasters**

As described in the methodology section, herein, we included the reflections of three authors who worked directly with the communities of KZN during the overlapping disasters between 2020 and 2022.

#### **Reflection 1: Sethenjwa Nduli**

*I recall the first time I joined the MA'AT Institute as one of the intern social workers during the dire state of COVID-19. Our team was faced with the reality that our lives were not immune to the devastating impact of COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed massive job loss and a sharp economic decline that left many feeling hopeless. Many of our clients opted to use traditional medicine over Western medicine. For example, a plant called "iboza" (ginger bush) was used to treat COVID-19 symptoms. Many claimed that it was highly effective. The option of tapping into our African indigenous knowledge systems played a critical role in addressing the many issues that came because of COVID-19.*

*As part of the MA'AT team, one of my key duties as an intern was to help our clients navigate through uncertainty and develop healthy coping methods while under lockdown restrictions. We used free teletherapy services to reach out to our clients, and we uncovered other predisposing societal ills, such as gender-based violence and hunger on the rise among our clients, especially African women. It was difficult to render our services telephonically because we relied mainly on the client's voice; being unable to see the client physically made it difficult to assess our impact on the client's life.*

*As intern social workers and academics, we found ourselves as frontline responders each time a disaster occurs. However, our role as social workers appeared unclear even in the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002. The lack of coordination from government and civil society organisations not only*

*poses a challenge for us on the ground but also leads to duplication of services. While trying to re-establish order after the riots and looting, the province of KZN experienced floods. As intern social workers and psychologists, we started our journey in Inanda, we visited a community hall that had been used as a remedial shelter for flood survivors. As we arrived as outsiders, we were welcomed by feelings and faces full of despair, hunger, and grief. As part of negotiating entry and building trust within the community, we joined them in song and prayer, allowing us to create rapport. In other shelters, survivors engaged in 'income' (African song) to cope with challenges; this is where we saw the power of song and dance in facilitating healing. As interns, we took part in this, which was in line with the philosophy and ways of MA'AT.*

*Through the partnership of the MA'AT and other organisations, we could show the true essence of Ubuntu philosophy by providing hot meals and other basic needs. Our work extended to other areas of eThekweni, where we discovered other challenges, such as racism, as in one of the shelters, people were divided according to race. As an African social worker, it was sad to hear about the ill-treatment that black people experienced as compared to those of other races. It was shocking to see that the legacy of apartheid continued to live on despite being governed under a democratically led government. Our engagements also revealed the divisions in a coalition government, leading to biases. For example, we saw that resources and donations were allocated based on one's political affiliation, and those not affiliated with specific political parties were not allocated resources and, in some cases, were excluded from the hot meals.*

## **Reflection 2: Bongane Mzinyane**

*I am writing this account in my dual capacity as an academic and registered social worker serving in one of the institutions of higher learning in KZN. My reflection is based on my community engagement experiences between 2020 and 2022. Catastrophic and synchronised overlapping disasters in KZN marked this era. From my subjective observation, I am arguing that these overlapping disasters exacerbated the pre-existing poverty of low-income*

*communities, claimed numerous lives and left several families displaced, homeless and destitute. This necessitated the university community, including myself, to jointly intervene with other community-based organisations, NGOs, and government departments. I managed to travel to different townships such as Tshelimnyama, KwaMashu, Inanda, Machobeni, Marian Ridge, and Molweni, amongst other areas. I executed most of my community engagement through the MA'AT Institute's philosophy of MA'AT, ubuntu, and Afrocentrism.*

*Starting in 2020, the MA'AT Institute convened numerous community-centred programmes that assisted communities with different challenges. The MA'AT programmes ranged from teletherapy, community awareness campaigns, group work, trauma debriefing, grief interventions, and poverty alleviation interventions, among other programmes. Before the 2022 KZN Floods, I occasionally served as a teletherapist for MA'AT in a programme that was initially intended to deal with the trauma of COVID-19; however, through my engagement with clients, it became apparent that beyond the psycho-social and physical impact of COVID-19 but many of the community members were battling with bread-and-butter issues such as poverty, domestic violence, etc.*

*Similar to COVID-19 lockdowns, the July 2021 looting exacerbated the pre-existing challenges of unemployment, trauma, and poverty. Due to the looting, several shopping malls within the townships and business districts had to close. Therefore, unemployment and poverty worsened. Some of those who lost their jobs reached out to the MA'AT teletherapy programme; through my engagements with some of my clients, it became apparent that their 'already strained businesses' suffered a double blow when they had to recover from the floods whilst they were already struggling from the effects of the lockdown. Consequently, looting and COVID-19 lockdowns compelled the hunger of those generating employment. They worsened the hunger of those already reliant on small-scale businesses within the townships and the city of Durban.*

*During the 2022 KZN Floods, I was part of a team of social work academics, psychology academics, social work interns, psychology interns, psychologists, registered counsellors, and registered social workers who provided psycho-social support to communities in KZN. The floods had a devastating impact on the communities, with many people being displaced, living in shelters, and traumatised. Negotiating entry into different shelters was difficult, so we had to employ Afrocentric strategies such as 'ingoma' (African song) to build rapport with the inhabitants of the community shelters whose spirits were low. However, 'ingoma' and 'ukugida' (traditional isiZulu dance) ultimately gained acceptance from the communities who were angry and despondent about the fact that many of the previous ones provided much-needed support. Our team adopted a culturally sensitive approach to our work. We recognised the importance of respecting the cultural norms and practices of the communities we were working with. We also recognised the importance of building trust with the communities and engaging with them in a way that was respectful and non-judgmental.*

*Building rapport through ways that resonated with the people was helpful because it assisted us in initiating some constructive conversation with our clients and scrapping our 'prepackaged' intervention plan, which was to offer trauma counselling to clients, among other things. However, upon arrival in several shelters, our clients frankly told us that they had not eaten anything since the previous day. As a result, we managed to coordinate other humanitarian organisations that were offering hot meals. We also managed to plan counselling (food for the soul) and refreshments (actual food for the body) for our interventions in the following days. Through these engagements, we realised that in an era of disasters, it is essential to prioritise physical needs before emotional needs; the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Theory became a helpful frame of reference in instances of crisis intervention.*

*Notably, the KZN floods of 2022 occurred during COVID-19 lockdowns, and such duality of challenges compounded the social work planning, assessment, rapport building, and interventions offered. We had to adapt our approach to ensure that we followed the necessary safety protocols while providing*

*effective support to the communities. We also had to adapt to Afrocentric methods of building rapport and intervention. It was also crucial for us to be mindful of the socio-economic impact that the pandemic was having on the mental health of the communities.*

*Through our work, we learned valuable lessons for rethinking community engagement by universities and academics. We recognised the importance of adopting a comprehensive, culturally sensitive approach to disaster responses and poverty alleviation. We also recognised the importance of building trust with the communities and engaging with them in a way that was respectful and culturally sensitive to understand their real challenges. Our work highlighted the need for a collaborative approach to disaster response involving the communities themselves in rebuilding and recovery. Intervening jointly with multiple stakeholders invoked a realisation that as a social worker (academic) within an institution of higher learning, I am a partner with other organisations, professionals, practitioners and the wider community surrounding the university.*

### **Reflection 3: Santham Ajodhia**

*As a social work mentor based at the MA'AT Institute, I accompanied a team of helping professionals to debrief members of the community that were affected by the 2022 KZN floods (Inanda, Pinetown, Kwadengezi, Umlazi, Molweni, Quarry Heights). Navigating our way through damaged infrastructure, the reality was devastation. At overcrowded shelters, community members clearly articulated their frustration. They were starving; some had not eaten for days, while others complained that they were neglected and could not access many services. Inequality and poverty exist, and disasters exacerbate the pre-existing conditions of poverty for poorer people. The question was, how do you debrief a person who is starving? This called for immediate crisis intervention, gathering our funds to provide basic food for those in need. We could not cater to all shelters, and partnerships with several non-governmental organisations (FUZE Institute, Gift of the Givers) were established. Once their hunger needs were cared for, community members eased into debriefing sessions.*

*We found an ambience of helplessness and powerlessness deeply embedded within these communities. People were traumatised by the flood events, some unable to close their eyes, remembering how they watched their loved ones swept away by the gushing water. They had lost everything; most were unemployed, relying on the social security grant and receiving little to no aid from local councillors. Mothers who could not mourn the loss of their children were forced to pull themselves together for their surviving children. Single mothers had no other choice but to seek loans from loan sharks to feed their children, drowning themselves in further debt and poverty. If there was enough, a survival of the fittest system ensued, and one either got breakfast or supper. There would be no lunch unless it were donated. These were the circumstances under which those who had lived in poverty remained in poverty and continued to be abused by the unequal social systems of power and privilege.*

*For me, this experience was life-changing. Coming from Indian ethnicity-working with the African community, my approach, skills, and interventions required a high level of cultural competency. This was strengthened through the mentorship of the MA'AT Institute, an organisation that taught me the true meaning of Ubuntu and collaboration. As a social worker guided by the principles of respect, balance and harmony, I saw an urgent need for social workers to be adequately trained, prepared and, more especially, respond through a culturally competent lens to communities affected by disasters.*

## **Discussion**

The above reflections support the consolidated literature as they outline that overlapping disasters had multifaceted effects in the province of KZN, especially in low-income communities. Ngcobo et al. (2023) explain that there has been a significant rise in the occurrence of disasters in the sub-Saharan region with more disastrous effects. Similarly, the above reflections demonstrate that overlapping disasters further exacerbated the psycho-social and socio-economic impact in low-income communities. In reflecting on the impact of overlapping disasters on low-income communities, Nduli remarks: “...we witnessed massive job loss and a sharp decline in the economy that



*left many feeling hopeless*". Beyond the psycho-social and socio-economic impact, race/ethnicity and class have proven central in disaster response, with historically marginalised races receiving lesser attention and services (Bolin & Kurtz, 2018; Sawada & Takasaki, 2017). Ajodhia said: "... *communities were hungry, many of whom had not eaten for days... community members reported that they were neglected and did not have access to many services*".

In the reflections above, Nduli states: "...*as an African social worker, it was sad to hear the ill-treatment that black people experienced as compared to those of other races*". These inequalities and injustices witnessed during the interventions compromised the human rights as enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 and the implementation of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002. However, this also challenges local and national governments, practitioners, policymakers, and organisations to align themselves firstly with the SDGs related to poverty alleviation and climate action during overlapping disasters.

Reoccurring from the reflections was the need to offer social welfare services to eliminate hunger problems and meet the basic needs of destitute communities. This led to the duplication of services. NemaKonde et al. (2021) blame the duplication of services during disaster response on the lack of coordination and communication between government departments and key stakeholders. In South Africa, the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 is the policy that aims to provide integrated and coordinated disaster management support, focusing on preventing or reducing the risk of disasters, mitigating the severity of disasters, emergency preparedness, rapid and effective response to disasters and post-disaster recovery; the establishment of national, provincial and municipal disaster management centres; disaster management volunteers; and matters incidental to it (Van Niekerk, 2014). Despite this act and other policies that aim to mitigate the impact of disasters, psycho-social interventions in communities highlighted the immense challenges faced by vulnerable communities, particularly those already living in poverty without access to daily basic needs and infrastructure. The challenges relating to the lack of coordination and integration of resources

and services posed numerous challenges for social workers. They questioned their role and legal mandate during the disaster response and recovery.

They aligned the social workers' response and interventions with the Afrocentric perspective, and MA'AT philosophy allowed for culturally relevant and people-centred practice. Social work practice grounded in Afrocentricity recognises the importance and relevance of spirituality and interconnectedness and considers cultural relevance as a key factor built upon centeredness, self-determination, and culture (Schiele, 2017; Mungai, 2015). Using "ingoma" and "ukugida" was instrumental in achieving what Mzinyane characterises in his reflection as "negotiating entry and building trust within the community. Taiwo (2018) called on social workers to recognise the privilege stemming from their social and professional status when working with poor communities. Beyond grounding social workers' practice in Afrocentrism and MA'AT philosophy, a new approach to community engagement for UKZN academics from various disciplines was centred on African methods that are cultural and context-specific. This was reflected by Mzinyane, who stated, "*I was part of a team of social work academics, psychology academics, social work interns, psychology interns, psychologists, registered counsellors, and registered social workers who provided psycho-social support to communities in KZN... we had to employ Afrocentric strategies*". Bhagwan (2020) explains that community engagement is fully engaged in the economic, cultural, and civic life of the communities the institution serves. Therefore, during the disasters in KZN, we saw UKZN academics rallying behind the MA'AT Institute and grounded their community engagement initiatives to communities in Afrocentrism, symbolising a major shift from the mainstream understanding of community engagement.

### **Recommendations**

The literature and reflections in this paper shed light on the importance of acknowledging and welcoming disaster social work. This, however, is a difficult task as it calls for social workers (students, academics and practitioners alike) to be trained about climate change and to introduce

specific guidelines for disaster social work intervention. To address this, the authors recommend that social work students and practitioners receive comprehensive education and training focusing on disaster preparedness, climate change and culturally sensitive practices. Due to the limited focus on climate change in social work practice and the lack of a clear illustration of the role that social workers ought to adopt in disaster management, It is recommended that there should be more of an enhancement of integration of the subject in social work curricula and training. Students and practitioners should be adequately trained in disaster management and climate change to enhance their understanding of their role in communities during disaster preparedness and response. Furthermore, we submit that social work advocacy must not only be limited to social intervention, among other conventional fields but can also expand in fields such as climate change and disasters.

Clear and detailed guidelines for disaster social work should be established and tailored for Afrocentric social work and the global South. In these guidelines, concise intervention practices, culturally competent community engagement and responsible resource management should be included. These guidelines should illustrate lucidly how social workers should assess, plan for, and execute their interventions amidst disasters. Moreover, the authors encourage partnerships and stakeholder collaboration to render effective and holistic services during disasters. Organisations and government departments should also regulate and monitor aid management (food, funds, equipment, and resources) to ensure transparency, accountability and clear protocol for monitoring resources and goods provided to communities. This may also assist in addressing the unfair distribution of goods and services experienced by communities during disasters. The reflections challenge social workers to adopt context-specific and relevant approaches. However, this ought to be prioritised in the education and training of social work students and emphasised in continuous professional development programmes. Social workers ought to strive to be culturally conscious and culturally competent, which would entail acknowledging the differences between people in multiple contexts and allowing oneself to be educated by community members about their indigenous knowledge systems, norms, values, and

practices. This ought to then shape the implementation of culturally sensitive and appropriate interventions. The reflections above strongly suggest that social work academics and practitioners should recognise the importance of building trust with the communities and engaging with them in a way that is respectful and culturally sensitive to understand their real challenges and ways of resilience. This means that to build rapport and gain entry into communities, social workers must acknowledge and respect the norms and standards of those communities.

## **Conclusion**

The article illuminates the alignment of social work with disaster response and management. This article's authors articulate a need to strengthen green social work practice and disaster management interventions. Ngcobo et al. (2023) suggest a similar view by stating that “[t]he topic of green social work and disaster-specific social work should be strengthened to tackle unpreparedness and raise awareness about the catastrophes of climate change that are now becoming common occurrences across the globe”.

Secondly, the reflections also highlight the importance of collaboration and partnership among various stakeholders to ensure more widespread, effective, and impactful aid. In their conclusions, Ngcobo et al. (2023:15) also support this by postulating that “... social work services are ineffective without strong participation and partnerships between multi-sector social workers, community leaders, caretakers, and community members and inter-stakeholder collaborations.” The Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 also encourages organisations and relevant stakeholders to achieve this through community engagements and stakeholder mobilisation to do away with a ‘top-down’ approach when working with vulnerable communities. By acknowledging and paying attention to green social work, disaster management and climate change, social work practices can greatly improve how we respond to and intervene effectively, fairly and culturally competently during disasters.

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