



Family Digest 26

August 2019

Winter: Wind, water, fire and earth

Winter is the time of year when poverty and the four elements of earth, wind, water and fire are felt most harshly. It is indeed a time of discontent and suffering. It is also the time when the lack of service delivery is most evident.

Fires frequently ravage informal settlements and the main contributing factor is open flame. Under-resourced communities are dependent on candles for light, and paraffin stoves for heat. “The fuels are burnt in inefficient, leaky and unstable appliances, leading to health losses from pollutant emissions, burns, and conflagrations.”¹ The limited space between the dwellings, combined with persistent wind, causes these fires to spread rapidly from one shack to another. This also makes it difficult for firefighters to reach the fire in time to extinguish it. These fires result in cruel burns and fatalities, and also in loss of the family possessions – including identity cards, school books and uniforms. Many residents of informal settlements experience such devastating fires more than once.

Demolitions, which are a constant threat to shack-dwellers, do not cease in winter. Their structures are reduced to rubble, and those who called them home are left at the mercy of the elements, as in the instance of Cato Manor in KwaZulu-Natal and Vrygrond in the Western Cape.

Storms with high winds can substantially damage informal dwellings; and while the wind might bring welcome rain, it also causes flooding. This is particularly the case in informal settlements in low-lying areas such as the Cape Flats, where there is a lack of proper drainage. Again, precious possessions and documents are lost. Flooding in rural areas damages roads and bridges, and drowning is not uncommon. On Easter Monday this year, devastating floods resulted in the deaths of 87 people in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and the Free State.² These rains, and those in the Western Cape and Alexandra in Johannesburg, compelled many families to abandon their flooded homes. Health concerns in such conditions are serious. It is hard to move those with disability, and children do not attend school because their uniforms are wet. It is difficult to dry clothing, bedding and other household goods. The only solution for many is an open flame, which once again raises the risk of fire.

In many rural areas the earth does not yield crops, due to overgrazing, soil degradation and drought, so the only source of food is that provided by social grants. Many people, including the elderly and the disabled, walk long distances to access these grants. The gathering of firewood for heating and cooking is arduous in the cold. The continued drought in the Northern Cape and Karoo areas means that municipal water is not potable and needs to be boiled before it can be used for cooking and drinking. The only alternative is to buy bottled water, which compromises the household budget of

those who can least afford it, and consequently there is less money available for heating and cooking in these bitterly cold areas.

While there are some emergency relief services provided by municipalities and NGOs, these interventions are palliative rather than substantive. And winter will come again next year...

Below please find some links to articles illustrative of the above.

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<https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/in-search-of-lasting-solutions-to-shack-fires-in-cape-town-20170313>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/people-plastic-city-cannot-even-afford-zinc-shack>

<http://www.fpsa.co.za/140-informal-settlement-fires-2018>

[https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-07-31-everything-is-gone-say-cape-towns-masiphumelele-residents-after-256-houses-burn-down/?tl_inbound=1&tl_groups\[0\]=8089](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-07-31-everything-is-gone-say-cape-towns-masiphumelele-residents-after-256-houses-burn-down/?tl_inbound=1&tl_groups[0]=8089)

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/drought-and-strike-leaves-taps-dry-butterworth/>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/our-shacks-are-filled-dirty-and-smelly-water/>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/new-round-demolitions-cato-manor/>

<http://www.ngopulse.org/article/action-required-reduce-fire-related-fatalities-during-winter>

<https://albertonrecord.co.za/177642/water-wednesday-children-drowning-remains-big-problem-sa/>

https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/child/injury/world_report/Drowning_english.pdf

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/land-occupation-eviction-processes-to-come-under-spotlight-in-vrygrond-case-20190625>

<https://ewn.co.za/2017/05/29/jukskei-river-residents-displaced-by-floods-decry-govt-over-failed-promises>

<https://ewn.co.za/2019/06/05/some-homes-roads-flooded-after-heavy-rain-in-ct>

¹ http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0256-95742017000400010

² The Sowetan, 13th August 2019.