



Unpreparedness during Disastrous Attacks: The View of South Africa Category B Municipalities

Nonzwakazi Beauty Makiwane^{1*}, and Chuma Sikwati²

¹ Faculty of Management Sciences and Public Administration Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth

² Faculty of Management and Public Administration Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth

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Abstract:

Disasters have become an unavoidable part of life worldwide. In South Africa, the frequency and severity of both natural and man-made disasters highlight the urgent need for effective disaster preparedness at the municipal level. Although significant progress has been made in disaster risk management policies, Category B municipalities in South Africa still face challenges associated with preparedness. The article examines the main factors contributing to disastrous incidents in South African Category B municipalities and early warning systems that evoke effective disaster readiness. Its purpose is to disclose the consequential influential perceptions of disaster management officials directly involved in disaster incidents in five Category B local municipalities (King Sabata Dalindyebo, Mhlontlo, Nyandeni, Port St. Johns, and Ingquza) incorporated in O.R. Tambo district. A qualitative approach was used, based on an interpretive framework. Twenty disaster management officials, considered key informants, completed self-administered, face-to-face, open-ended questionnaires, with follow-up interviews to clarify responses. The data were analyzed through content analysis to identify and interpret themes. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive, long-term disaster preparedness strategies and resilience plans tailored to the specific challenges faced by Category B municipalities in South Africa. Fostering democratic principles, ensuring local responsiveness, and maintaining global competitiveness through partnerships and collaboration must be strengthened and maintained by South Africa's Category B municipalities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals, the National Development Plan, and the African Union's Agenda 2063 is demonstrated by their notable readiness during catastrophic events.

Keywords: Unprepared disastrous attacks, Category B municipalities, disaster management officials

INTRODUCTION

Despite being categorized as a middle-income country with substantial infrastructure and resources, South Africa faces significant challenges in disaster preparedness, particularly in Category B municipalities. These municipalities, identified under the Municipal Structures Act (1998), are responsible for delivering essential services and managing daily operations at a grassroots level in both urban and rural areas. However, their level of disaster preparedness has consistently been questioned, especially considering current incidents that reveal serious gaps in emergency response protocols.

Effective disaster preparedness emphasizes the importance of planning, resource allocation, community awareness, and a strong governance framework. Additionally, Smith (2021) asserts a direct link between preparedness capabilities and catastrophic attacks, leaving impoverished

*Corresponding Author : Makiwane, Faculty of Management and Public Administration Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth Campus, Butterworth ORCID iD: 0000-0002-2513-8730, E-mail: bmakiwane@wsu.ac.za

communities more vulnerable if there are no effective, efficient, and fair hazard management plans within South African Category B municipalities. This study evaluates the influence of disaster unpreparedness, resulting in unnecessary damage that could have been prevented or mitigated early.

SUPPORTIVE THEORIES

Systems theory suggests that Category B municipalities operate as complex systems made up of interconnected parts (Bertalanffy, 1968). This means that the three spheres of government, each with its own departments, must work together cohesively for successful disaster preparedness. A pandemic or terrorist attack is an example of catastrophic events where the failure of one department can trigger a domino effect on others. For instance, poor communication between medical facilities and emergency services can worsen the situation. Zhang & Li (2022) observe that Category B municipalities often face information silos, causing them to respond slowly to emergencies and deploy inadequate resources. The holistic perspective of systems theory emphasizes understanding how these components depend on each other.

Organizational theory examines how processes, cultures, and structures affect performance during disastrous attacks. South African Category B municipalities must plan and organise resource allocation, bureaucracy, and hierarchical dynamics effectively and efficiently to avoid provoking disaster unpreparedness. Because traditional bureaucratic structures depend on established chains of command, they often hinder quick decision-making and can rigidly delay responses needed in crises. Mavuso (2021) argues that for South African Category B municipalities to promote decentralized decision-making, they should adopt a more flexible organizational structure. This flexibility enables disaster management officials to respond rapidly to emergencies, which is crucial for minimizing damage and ensuring public safety. Additionally, fostering a culture of cooperation rather than competition among municipal departments can support the development of a unified disaster response plan. Besides possessing the necessary skills for their disaster roles, these officials also need a solid understanding of the operational interdependencies among departments. As Zulu (2022) points out, training simulations that promote cross-departmental collaboration can prepare disaster management personnel, including municipal staff, for real-life situations and improve overall readiness.

Socio-political theory traverses the influence of political environments, power dynamics, and societal structures on disaster preparedness. In South Africa, socioeconomic inequality and political favoritism often cause challenges for Category B municipalities when distributing resources. These municipalities are economically or politically marginalized and are typically overlooked in disaster preparedness planning, leaving them particularly vulnerable during crises. Transparency and community participation, particularly at Category B municipalities in South Africa, build trust among stakeholders involved in disaster preparedness. The idea is to enhance residents' confidence in disaster management authorities and officials, rather than refusing to follow safety procedures or evacuation orders during disastrous attacks.

UNDERLYING FACTORS SUBSCRIBE TO DISASTROUS ATTACKS IN SOUTH AFRICAN CATEGORY MUNICIPALITIES

Improper, All-Inclusive, Long-Term Comprehensive Disaster Plans

Mthethwa & Ndlovu (2022) revealed that only 45% of Category B municipalities in South Africa can formulate disaster plans and/or strategies that align with those of national legislation. The rest preferred generic templates driven by ad hoc responses over well-thought-out crisis management initiatives. To make the situation worse, most existing plans in Category B municipalities often fail to include community participation, contributing to ineffectiveness during disastrous attacks. The absence of suitable localized plans hinders effective response and recovery efforts. Every Category B municipality should develop a robust disaster management plan tailored to its specific context and needs. This plan should avoid excluding stakeholders and/or community engagement and involvement, who, in most cases, are the primary victims of disastrous attacks (Mathebula, 2024). The South African Disaster Management Act (2002) warned that when municipalities in South Africa engage in development, they should always be mindful of the mandates of these plans, namely risk

assessment, prevention, mitigation, and response. Additionally, Category B municipalities in South Africa should be proactive in constantly reviewing and updating their plans to adapt to changing, disastrous circumstances.

Improper Training And Capacity Building Exposure

Many employees in South African Category B municipalities lack proper and thorough training in disaster mechanisms and protocols. This attitude contributes to unnecessary delays in predicting and responding to disaster attacks (Tshabalala & Mokoena, 2023). Because these employees are unable to respond effectively, further mismanagement and chaos regarding their property damage. This means that the readiness of disaster management officials and anyone directly or indirectly involved in disaster attacks is crucial.

For instance, during the COVID-19 outbreak, several Category B municipalities observed gaps due to improper training, for instance, first aid instead of exposure to legitimate crises. Johnson & Lee (2022) emphasise that education and programs for municipal staff and volunteers, which instil knowledge and skills in tackling catastrophic attacks, should be budgeted and conducted continuously and regularly. Collaborations with universities and disaster management organizations can provide the expertise needed to develop competent disaster management teams (Radebe, 2026).

Community Awareness And Engagement Deficits

Many Category B municipalities in South Africa fail to prioritize outreach programs, which are sometimes underdeveloped, ultimately severely undermining the effectiveness of disaster response. Consequently, the public may not be equipped to respond correctly to emergencies (Thompson et al., 2022). A lack of awareness and engagement about disaster risks reduces the communities' ability to respond effectively during crises. As a result, many residents may not understand the extent of risks they face or the appropriate actions to take during disastrous attacks. This knowledge gap can lead to panic and chaos during emergencies, further hampering response efforts (Mkhize, 2020).

This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, when residents who had not received sufficient safety instructions were caught unprepared. Increasing community awareness and engagement involves launching awareness campaigns and inclusive planning processes. Town hall meetings and workshops can encourage residents to actively participate in disaster preparedness activities, fostering a culture of resilience. Engaging communities also allows officials to gather valuable insights, as suggested by Dlamini (2024), ensuring that local needs are prioritized. Involving communities in disaster preparedness programs fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, empowering individuals to contribute to collective safety.

Communication Failure

Communication disruptions and failures can lead to misinformation among South African Category B municipalities, exacerbating their lack of readiness for disasters. Because disaster management officials fail to provide timely reports, the tendency is to misguide and deceive communities about safety procedures during disasters (Garcia et al., 2024), ultimately risking public safety. Furthermore, a coordinated response to catastrophic occurrences is hampered by the absence of clearly defined roles for numerous stakeholders, including community groups, non-profits, and local government agencies. Disaster management professionals share the same sentiments with Gqomfa et al. (2023) that ineffective communication channels cause delays in information flow between South African Category B municipalities and the public, perceived as unpreparedness. To increase response efficiency, Category B municipalities in South Africa embraced Miller's (2023) suggestion on creating communication systems, which facilitate quick information sharing between government agencies, first responders, the community, and reaction teams.

Despite operating with outmoded or nonexistent communication infrastructure, Category B municipalities in South Africa have maintained intra-, inter-, and extra-agency coordination. Urban and rural Category B municipalities in South Africa alike need to invest in reliable communication systems, utilizing technology to disseminate information effectively. Implementing alert systems,

such as SMS notifications, community radio announcements, and social media updates, can keep residents informed of impending disasters and available resources.

Institutional Weaknesses

Category B municipalities in South Africa are poorly prepared for catastrophes due to the existence of institutional weaknesses resulting from problems with governance, unstable leadership, and insufficient interdepartmental coordination. Research by Makhetha & O'Reilly (2021) suggests that inadequately designed disaster management frameworks may lead to ineffective response strategies because of a lack of excellence in leadership. Roles and obligations are sometimes unclear, leaving Category B municipalities in South Africa unprepared for disastrous attacks.

Furthermore, inefficient bureaucracy hinders prompt decision-making, characterised with lack of cooperation between disaster preparedness and other municipal responsibilities, such as environmental management and urban planning, exacerbating unpreparedness. Overlapping obligations, uncertainty, and resource waste occur from South African Category B municipalities working in silos, impeding collaborative efforts required for comprehensive disaster preparedness measures (Huysamen, 2020). Risk factors must be recognized and preventative measures carried out with integrated strategies.

Financial Constraints

A significant contributing factor to disaster unpreparedness is an absolute extreme shortage of funding. Many Category B municipalities in South Africa are unable to adequately fund disaster preparedness initiatives due to financial constraints. Fisher et al. (2023) claim that funding for disaster management is usually given precedence over more urgent needs not related to disaster preparedness. The creation of efficient catastrophe response systems is put at risk by this prioritization. Lack of funds affects several aspects of disaster preparedness, including emergency response training, early warning systems, and the acquisition of essential equipment. For instance, South African Category B municipalities might lack the technology required to efficiently monitor and predict disasters, which could result in a delay in emergency responses (Dlamini & Van Zyl, 2022). Furthermore, without sufficient funding, Category B municipalities in South Africa cannot prevent disasters; hence, their approach to disaster management is reactive rather than proactive.

CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT DISASTROUS ATTACKS

Early warning mechanisms are systems designed to provide timely information about potential disasters, allowing communities to prepare and respond effectively. These can range from meteorological alerts concerning natural disasters like floods, storms, and lightning, road erosion, unbearable heat, pandemics, to alerts regarding human-induced threats such as terrorism or civil unrest, or pipe water explosions and fire. It is becoming increasingly clear that early alert warning mechanisms that can successfully prevent such tragedies are essential.

Data Collections and Analysis

Large amounts of precise, up-to-date, and valuable data must be acquired quickly from a variety of sources, including internal, intermediate, and external elements that could lead to disastrous risks (Kumar & Haque, 2022). To further improve data collection activities, communities should be encouraged to report suspect items, materials, building constructions, and behaviors that might result in devastating occurrences.

Specialized equipment and skilled individuals who can accurately interpret the data are necessary for effective analysis. Category B municipalities in South Africa can anticipate risks through applying approaches such as predictive analytics to uncover patterns and trends in catastrophic attackers. Additionally, forecast accuracy can be improved by artificial intelligence, which would strengthen the South African Category B municipality's readiness even more.

Technological Resources

Communities can be informed about emerging risks and suitable safety measures using traditional media, social media, and mobile notifications (Gregory et al., 2024). By adopting Geographic Information Systems to monitor and analyze spatial data, municipalities can more quickly identify crime hotspots and assess risk factors in specific locations (Mkhize, 2021). Authorities can determine how effectively to allocate resources by comparing crime statistics with socioeconomic characteristics. By monitoring social media conversations, Category B municipalities in South Africa can determine public sentiment, identify concerns, and identify potential threats before they escalate into violence (Ndlovu, 2022).

These apps and digital technological devices can foster collaboration and confidence in safety initiatives by enabling direct communication between locals and authorities (Smit et al., 2023). Artificial intelligence and machine learning-powered systems have improved municipalities' ability to predict assaults based on massive datasets. Machine learning algorithms might glance at historical crime data, social trends, and other relevant factors to improve forecast accuracy (Shabangu & Phakathi, 2024). Municipalities can use predictive weather models created by the South African Weather Service to prepare for flooding and other climate-related calamities (Chen et al., 2023).

Disaster Management Centers

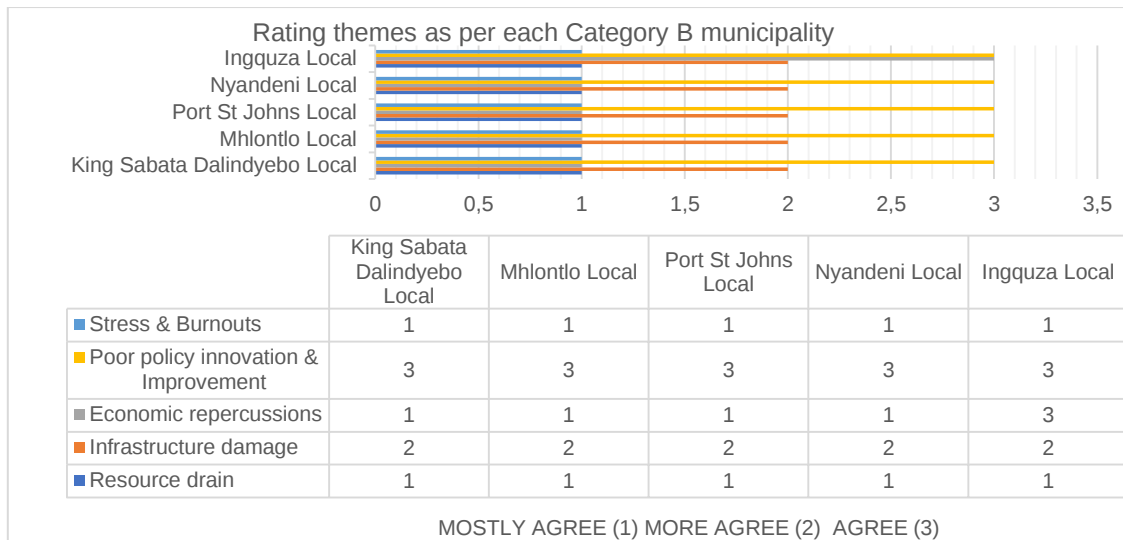
In South Africa, legislation such as the Disaster Management Act (No. 57 of 2002) establishes municipalities' disaster management obligations, highlighting the necessity of preparedness, response, and recovery activities. Establishing a municipal disaster management center with qualified experts capable of analyzing hazards and organizing actions can considerably improve local capacities on all disaster matters.

METHODS

A descriptive survey research design that is congruent with the interpretivist paradigm is linked to the qualitative research approach (Bartley & Hashemi, 2024). The study is anxious to determine the relationship between the unpreparedness of South African Category B municipalities during disastrous attacks. Purposeful convenience sampling was used to choose a sample of disaster management officials as key informants. Twenty municipal disaster management representatives from five Category B municipalities incorporated within O.R. Tambo District Municipality were given open-ended face-to-face questionnaires, and the uncovered gaps were filled through interviews. Focus groups were recorded to learn how they felt about being unprepared for catastrophic attacks in their municipalities. Content analysis was used to comprehend and assess the context of the unpreparedness phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

RESULTS

Table 1. Disaster Management officials' perceptions of unpreparedness during disastrous attacks



Source: Field survey, 2026

Theme 1: Resource drain

Twenty disaster management officials mostly agree that resource drain is a major challenge in their municipalities, experiencing severe resource limitations (funds, staff, skills, equipment). These officials contend that their municipality's budgets are severely impacted by the expense of replacing or repairing destroyed infrastructure if there is no preparedness before the catastrophic attacks. They concur with Sibanda (2024), who claims that financial hardship might divert funds from critical developmental projects, prolonging a cycle of neglect and decline. Regretfully, they noted that the viability and resilience of their municipalities are seriously threatened by these catastrophic attacks, which negatively impact residents' quality of life. Furthermore, the South African Disaster Management Institute (2021) found that resource degradation has a detrimental influence on agricultural assets, clean water sources, and energy supply. Resource drain affects not only individual homes but also local economies and necessitates external aid, which can be delayed.

Theme 2: Infrastructure damage

Disaster preparedness is vital for preventing or reducing damage to infrastructure during emergencies. Consequently, poor infrastructure hinders emergency services' ability to respond quickly. Many Category B municipalities face challenges with aging infrastructure, which puts their operational readiness at risk (Smit & du Plessis 2022). All disaster management officials from five municipalities mostly agree that, because they do not start from zero, they already have existing infrastructure (such as roads, bridges, buildings, and electrical wires). Being unprepared and having damaged infrastructure disrupts educational activities, limits access to healthcare and leads to a chain of socioeconomic problems (Jansen et al., 2022). Khumalo (2022) recommends that Category B municipalities take proactive steps in disaster preparedness if they want to restore stability and sustainability.

Theme 3: Economic repercussions

It has mostly agreed by all disaster management officials in five Category B municipalities that small enterprises, investment, productivity, and unemployment are all at risk due to a lack of preparedness. Additionally, they stated that local economies in their jurisdictions depend heavily on these businesses for day-to-day operations, therefore their demise may have long-term effects. Businesses often flee to safer locations when disasters hit, causing capital flight in unprepared in five Category B municipalities. Inadequately equipped Category B municipalities observe rising unemployment rates, diminishing revenue streams, trapping them in cycles of economic collapse.

In addition, decreasing tax revenues following catastrophes may have an impact on the amount of money available for emergency preparedness (Garcia et al., 2025). The situation is particularly dire in communities residing in five Category B municipalities, where job opportunities are already limited.

Thus, persistent disaster unpreparedness is a direct and indirect consequence of economic consequences.

Theme 4: Poor policy innovation & improvement

Although policy innovation and improvement are considered seriously in their municipalities, all disaster management officials agree that they have concerns about their unsuitability, which may not adequately incorporate new data or learnings from past experiences. Their concern is the same as Kgobe & Moeketsi (2024), who revealed that the disaster management policies in the O.R. Tambo District often do not reflect the changing climatic conditions or community needs. This stagnation can lead to repetitive failures in disaster preparedness and response, emphasizing the need for dynamic policy approaches that engage stakeholders at all levels.

Additionally, despite the increased frequency of disasters, disaster management officials in five Category B municipalities confirmed that they rely on outdated frameworks that fail to incorporate modern strategies or technologies. A report from the Center for Disaster Risk Reduction (2020) emphasizes the need for adaptive policies that respond to climate change impacts and community vulnerabilities. Instead, policy implementation tends to prioritize immediate responses without sufficient foresight or adaptability.

Theme 5: Unpleasant stress & burnout

All disaster management officials mostly agree that the psychological toll they experience, including frontline responders, cannot be overstated. They add that the cumulative effects of repeated exposure to disasters lead to significant stress and burnout. They concur with Khumalo & Mpofu (2024), that their mental health is adversely affected, resulting in decreased effectiveness in crisis response. This issue is compounded by the lack of proper institutional support for psychological services within their municipalities, leaving officials with little recourse to manage their mental health in high-stress environments. Also, residents and municipal employees face heightened levels of stress and burnout as they navigate uncertain and hazardous living conditions, increasing reports of anxiety, depression, and trauma (Sithole et al., 2022). environment. Therefore, enhancing the well-being of disaster response teams is crucial to maintaining a resilient disaster management system.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings show a complex interaction of impacts resulting from being unprepared during devastating attacks. Floods, storms, lightning, extortion, infections, fire, and brutal killings are among the notable and ongoing tragedies. One of the most immediate consequences of South African Category B municipalities' devastating attacks is a drain on resources. They usually work with extremely constrained resources, infrastructure, staff, and equipment, which is made worse after a major disaster. For instance, victims are placed in temporary buildings for survival when unexpected floods or storms occur, necessitating emergency care. This redirection of resources leads to shortages in key services such as garbage disposal, healthcare, and community safety programs. Furthermore, the expense of healing victims, bolstering security, and replacing damaged infrastructure and facilities may drastically drain local finances; as a result, progress in areas like public transit, housing, and education may be slowed. The delicate balance required for the sustainability of municipal operations is undermined by frequent attacks, which can cause disruptions that take years to recover from.

Important infrastructure, such as roads, public buildings, hospitals, schools, and others, may sustain damage or vandalism that calls for costly repairs and restoration. For instance, a devastating attack on a nearby school building would prevent regular academic services from continuing, which would affect the quality of education. Damage to transportation infrastructure increases travel costs and durations, hinders mobility, and reduces access to jobs and essential services. The infrastructure repercussions are particularly harsh for marginalized and disadvantaged populations that heavily rely on municipal services. Disparities that already exist are often made worse by the loss of infrastructure, which makes it more difficult for residents to meet their needs. Additionally, such harm may result in long-term changes to the dynamics of the community; schools may cease or move,

forcing families to find other schools that are far away or to compromise the education of their children.

South African Category B municipalities' attacks have far-reaching economic effects that go well beyond the expense of immediate repairs. A municipality's perceived safety and stability have a substantial influence on its capacity to attract industry and investment. Frequent attacks induce hesitancy and anxiety among potential investors, which lowers economic activity and eventually lowers employment. Particularly badly affected by turbulent times are small businesses, which are often the backbone of local economies. Eventually, a lot of business owners might choose to close their doors or move to safer areas, which would deny the community income and employment opportunities. Additionally, because tourists tend to stay away from Category B municipalities that are perceived as unstable or dangerous, violent occurrences have a big effect on local economies that depend on tourism. Tourism losses damage a multitude of industries, including hospitality, retail, and transportation, perpetuating a never-ending downward spiral. Businesses that fail or close reduce a community's capacity to generate income, which exacerbates poverty and increases reliance on already overburdened municipal services.

In addition to the evident impacts on resources, infrastructure, and the economy, residents of Category B municipalities in South Africa ravaged by catastrophic disasters also have severe psychological fallout. Psychological distress can result from long-term exposure to violence, anxiety about one's safety, and the strain of navigating broken social systems. Stress can manifest as depression, anxiety disorders, burnout, and other mental health issues, making recovery efforts much more challenging. Stress levels are considerably higher among municipal employees, especially those in public health and emergency services. They oversee responding to crises, often working overtime without enough support or resources. This ongoing pressure can lead to burnout, which lowers their effectiveness and responsiveness at a time when communities most need them. Furthermore, municipalities' general ability to respond to persistent challenges may be weakened by high turnover rates among these workers, which can exacerbate staffing shortages. Families may find it challenging to support one another emotionally, which can cause tension in relationships and increase conflict inside the home. Educational establishments are also under stress; traumatized students may struggle to focus or achieve academically, which may have long-term effects on their future.

CONCLUSION

A careful evaluation of unpreparedness during disastrous attacks in South African Category B municipalities exposes a major gap in governance and disaster management policy. It draws attention to how urgently financing, stakeholder involvement, and personnel training reform are needed. Intentionally increasing local capacity can help Category B municipalities in South Africa better safeguard their citizens from the negative impacts of disasters. Putting proactive and participatory disaster management strategies into practice will be essential to creating resilient communities that can survive future difficulties as the danger scenario changes. Only by working together will South Africa be able to improve readiness and protect its citizens from unavoidable adversity.

Conflict of Interest

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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