

Disaster risk reduction in Southern Africa: hot rhetoric, cold reality

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Abstract

Last year, southern Africa was host to two contradictory events. The first, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, optimistically aimed to map forward a path to global sustainability. The second, the launching of a series of international humanitarian assistance appeals, aimed more fundamentally at averting the devastating consequences of regional famine.

That these events, one promising to ensure our future collective security, and the other, a desperate plea to avert current human hardship and widespread suffering, should occur concurrently in the same region, underlines the many contradictions and disconnects in prevailing development policy and practice – especially as they apply to the management of disaster risk – and particularly as these relate to southern Africa.

This article will reflect on the challenges of implementing disaster risk reduction in southern Africa, a region not historically regarded as “disaster-prone”, with specific reference to southern Africa’s current humanitarian emergency.

The paper will begin by reflecting the present status of humanitarian need in famine-affected countries and possible explanations for the severity of the impact. This will be followed by a reflection on the dilemmas and divisions that have shaped disaster mitigation efforts in southern Africa. In this context, specific attention will be given to factors that have discouraged greater national ownership of disaster risk within southern Africa, along with the challenges of bridging historic divisions between disaster reduction and development practice.

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“Not a normal famine”

In 1992-93, the region’s food security crisis was the result of an extreme global El Niño event, which triggered widespread drought conditions. However, even these sizeable reductions in regional food production did not lead to famine. Ten years later, famine conditions – in part exacerbated by rainfall failure, but more significantly by widespread disruptions to food availability, failures of governance and extreme levels of prevailing poverty - have led to unparalleled levels of hardship for many southern Africans.

The severity of this crisis is largely attributed to the impact of HIV, itself a “creeping emergency” that has progressively eroded the lives and livelihoods of millions of southern Africans during the past decade. Poorly managed responses to HIV/AIDS have contributed to southern Africa’s vulnerability, at both household as well as macro-economic levels. In this context there is increasing awareness that the “typical” humanitarian response of providing food aid “will not solve the problem because the underlying causes of the HIV/AIDS pandemic will not make this famine a normal famine. There is no end to it because people are too weak to plant, too weak to harvest, so this will go on. The problems don’t go away with better weather”.¹

In many respects, the emergency now faced is a perfect reflection of disaster risk at its clearest. It illustrates almost unequivocally, how disaster risk is driven upwards by often silent but intensifying conditions of political, socio-economic and environmental vulnerability. Under these conditions, all that is required is a modest external threat – such as an unexceptional drought or heavy rainfall event - to trigger widespread suffering. In this context, effective disaster risk reduction roots itself in driving down prevailing vulnerability conditions through ongoing development programmes, rather than limiting itself to a major response once a crisis becomes apparent.

Clearly, the severity of this year’s emergency is driven by the past mismanagement of the HIV pandemic and other “entangling crises” that “ensnare the region’s most vulnerable”.² These include erratic rainfall patterns and graphic failures in responsible governance in several countries. They also reflect the unsurprising consequences of persistent crippling foreign debt, collapsing commodity prices and limited export earnings that have curtailed expenditures in essential services and caused contraction of formal employment opportunities. These powerful macroeconomic forces have driven widespread trends in socio-economic vulnerability across much of southern Africa, undermining resilience to natural or other shocks at both household as well as national levels.

While the present crisis reflects the interplay of a wide range of complex political, natural, social and economic factors, the scope of this article primarily will explore reasons for the region’s limited disaster mitigation capability, despite at least ten years of protracted drought and flood relief operations, as well as significant investments in “capacity building”.

Disasters and development – dilemmas and divisions

Different disasters: diverging perspectives

Disaster reduction efforts in Africa have followed a somewhat different course than those in other continents. In southern Africa, and perhaps more widely across Africa, the field of disaster reduction has never explicitly achieved the same policy stature or secured levels of financial commitment comparable to those seen in Asia or Latin America. This is not only due to the nature of Africa's disaster risk profile, which has differed from that reflected in other continents. It is also explained by the character of international assistance that has tended to be prolonged aid for either refugees/displaced populations or highly visible food and other humanitarian assistance in times of drought and famine.

In part it also reflects the political priorities of Africa's emerging democracies. In southern Africa specifically, issues concerning development and national security have been historically associated with struggles for independence and freedom from political, military and other forms of oppression. These preoccupations, rather than concerns for threats triggered by nature, have dominated national and regional security agendas. Even today, despite some progress in favour of democratic governance across southern Africa, actual and potential internal conflict is perceived as and remains the primary threat to national security in several countries.

However, as is the case with so many fields, dominant global thinking on "natural disasters" has been shaped by past and prevailing patterns of risk in Asia, Europe and the Americas. In these regions, disaster losses are attributed largely to the impacts of sudden-onset events that result in damage to physical infrastructure and loss of human lives. In contrast, Africa's disaster losses have in the past been associated with either "creeping emergencies" such as HIV and famine, or complex emergencies that result in large-scale internal or cross-border displacement and requires protracted external relief for many years. Moreover, the continent's somewhat slower pattern of urbanization is reflected in patterns of disaster occurrence that take place in rural areas, and not in towns or cities, as is the case in Latin America and Asia.

As a result, sustainable efforts to reduce disaster vulnerability have not received the same priority as in other countries of the South. Moreover, technical lessons potentially learned from other regions with respect to disaster reduction have not easily transferred to Africa, given the continent's differing risk profile.

This has happened despite published literature that explicitly links disaster and development processes – available for nearly thirty years. Fred Cuny³ and Amartya Sen⁴ both highlighted the links between underlying development vulnerabilities and subsequent disaster risk, although they did not use these words specifically. Sen's seminal work in India on famine and exchange entitlements specifically attributed famine-related losses more to failures in entitlements than failures in rainfall or crop production patterns.

More recently, other writers (Robert Chambers, Ken Hewitt and Ben Wisner for example) have also repeatedly stressed the developmental underpinnings of disaster vulnerability. Yet despite an abundance of compelling literature, it is important to recognise that disaster-related policy and practice is a highly visible operational field. In this regard, within southern Africa it has been less informed by theoretical discourse – either

generated regionally or internationally, than driven by political exigency, humanitarian imperative, media pressure and “on-the-ground” realities.

Externalisation of relief responsibility

Despite the limited profile given to disaster management in the region, the protection of national and regional food security was an early strategic priority for the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), SADC’s predecessor. This was reflected in the establishment of a Regional Early Warning Unit in the then SADCC Food Security Technical Advisory Unit based in Harare. As early as the 1980s, the REWU built capacity to monitor and consolidate data on regional food security for each growing season. This was considered essential in a region where more than 26% of all export earnings were generated by agricultural production, and where 80% of the population in four SADCC Member States (Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and Tanzania) was dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. The REWU has remained pivotal for tracking changes in food security, and was at the forefront of the regional drought response in 1991-92 as well as the current crisis, even though it was never established explicitly as a “disaster management “ structure.

These ongoing concerns with the protection of food security were certainly justified in the 1980s, a decade characterised by widespread political instability and armed conflict. Similarly, the recurrent droughts of the 1990s underlined the continuing precariousness of southern Africa’s food security.

The concerted efforts by SADC structures, national governments, nongovernmental organisations and international assistance partners successfully averted widespread loss and starvation during the 1990s. However, one unintended outcome of this prolonged and generous international humanitarian assistance may have been to discourage local initiative for the ownership of and responsibility for disaster risk. This is reflected a decade later in continued dependence on international assistance in times of disaster. It also applies to the lack of initiative in generating locally-relevant disaster risk reduction programmes and capacity-building activities that produce skilled practitioners able to integrate disaster considerations into ongoing activities and services.

The protracted humanitarian assistance efforts of the 1980s and 1990s also established a powerful operational precedent for shaping national perceptions of disaster risk in southern Africa. Well-resourced externally funded relief programmes infused the region with material, logistic and technical assistance to support refugees, internally displaced people and local populations recurrently drought-stricken in the 1980s and 1990s, often for years at a time.

While there is no question that the humanitarian crises spawned by conflicts in Angola, Mozambique and South Africa necessitated a concerted external response, their duration and “relief” orientation conveyed powerful signals with respect to the scope of disaster-related practice. They defined the field as highly reactive and relief-oriented, and extremely dependent on outside initiative and financial support.

So, while the 1990s saw the growth of a body of international “best practice” that increasingly underlined the intertwined relationship between disasters and development, this discourse was largely irrelevant to the practical reality in southern Africa, where externally-funded relief operations ran largely parallel to ongoing governmental

programmes. In many instances, these were even de-linked from the development initiatives supported by the same external assistance partners responsible for funding relief.

There have been several consequences of this “externalisation of disaster response” and its separation from mainstream development priorities. Most importantly, it has effectively disabled true ownership of disaster risk by southern African countries, by encouraging an automatic dependency on outside help when circumstances become unmanageable.

Ultimately, it remains a government’s “duty of care” to protect its citizens from unnecessary hardship and loss. Historically, responsible governance with respect to disasters has involved being prepared to anticipate impending threats and respond timeously, first with relief and then recovery assistance. In most southern African countries, this obligation is laid down in Civil Protection or Disaster Management legislation.

While there is no question that governments have a primary duty for alleviating suffering in times of distress, responsible governance today goes far beyond submitting an emergency appeal for international assistance when national food security is under threat. Responsive governance today prioritises developmental initiatives that build local resilience to expected threats, so that a “hazard event” no longer equals a disaster.

Given the well-recognised climate variability facing southern African countries, key government line departments should have by now “built-in” both mitigation and preparedness measures to anticipate and avert the consequences of climate threats to food security. No longer is it reasonable to declare every meteorological drought a “disaster”, when erratic rainfall patterns are the norm rather than the exception in southern Africa. Responsible governance anticipates and manages expected threats as a first step, and only as a second step transfers “residual risk” to external partners.

Shifting global priorities and funding shortfalls with respect to last year’s southern African appeals confirm that the established pattern of “risk transfer” to international assistance partners that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s is no longer realistic. Yet, southern African countries have been conditioned to wait until there is irrefutable evidence of crisis, and then seek international aid, rather than building anticipatory capabilities that reduce disaster risk proactively.

Second, the separation of disaster relief operations from the underlying “drivers of developmental vulnerability” has resulted in our misjudging the crippling impact of “creeping co-disasters” such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The “successful” drought operations of the 1990s, measured in terms of metric tonnes of food aid delivered, boreholes rehabilitated and supplementary feeding beneficiaries fed, were almost naively oblivious to the silent and unstoppable march of HIV which, less than a decade later, would drive unprecedented human hardship and loss.

Third, the powerful operational relief machine does not easily lend itself to inclusion in local research, academic and developmental agendas. Lessons learned from Northern and Southern countries elsewhere indicate that when disaster risk issues are actively taken up as local research priorities by institutions of higher learning and advocacy

organisations and driven into public domain, there is greater engagement by civil society and demand for governmental accountability in risk aversion, not merely disaster relief.

Regrettably, disaster response in southern Africa is so powerfully operational and internationally driven, that it has received insufficient research scrutiny or local analysis. Moreover, in southern Africa, its applied orientation sets it aside from being a field “worthy” of scientific study, and is thus largely ineligible for research funding. This is also reflected in the limited number of formal publications generated by southern Africans concerning their disaster risk. The absence of a locally-generated body of disaster risk knowledge subsequently discourages local ownership of risk by constraining the generation and dissemination of local knowledge. Moreover, it signals to the region as well as the outside world that little reflective and strategic capability exists locally – and that outside assistance is critical and necessary.

Disaster management and development: divisions in discourse

In part, southern Africa’s history of protracted externally resourced relief operations has delayed the integration of locally-owned disaster reduction and development programmes. In addition, the “rolling-out” of disaster management units in many countries along with a number of regional capacity-building initiatives have also not always fulfilled the promise of dramatically strengthened disaster reduction capabilities.

There are several reasons for this. One very practical obstacle is that “operational” disaster discourse is replete with terminology and practices that are largely irrelevant to the region’s development or political priorities.

Before taking the discussion further, it is useful to present some key working definitions that are important to the “dialogue division” between disaster and development fields, and also reflect the evolution of less divisive terminology over recent years.⁵

Disaster

A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community/society to cope using its own resources.

Disaster management

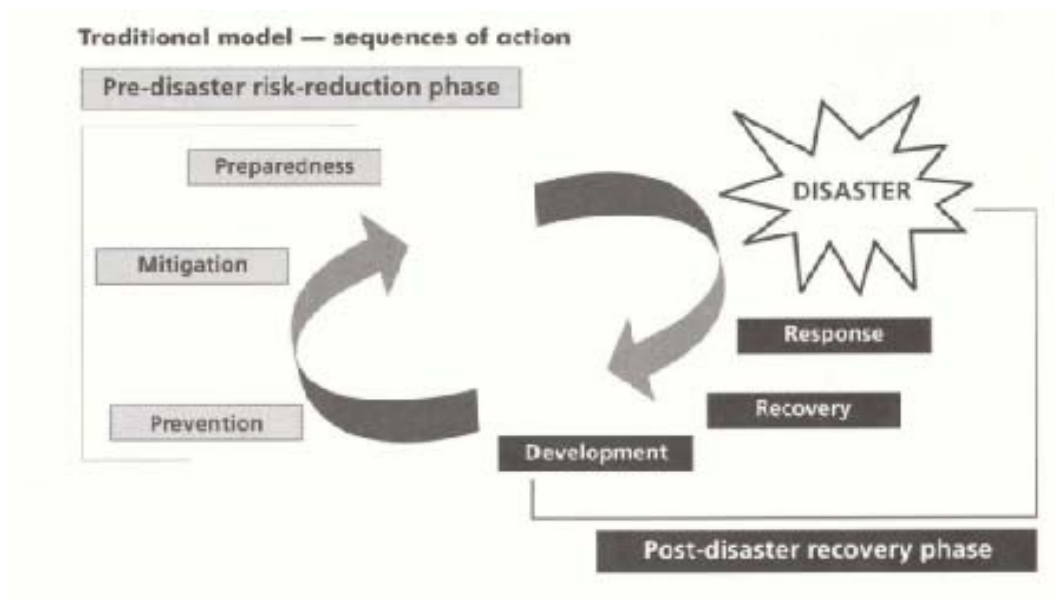
The organisation, management of resources and responsibilities for dealing with all aspects of emergencies (including disaster prevention and mitigation), but especially disaster preparedness, response and rehabilitation/recovery.

Conventionally portrayed as the “disaster management cycle”, (see Figure 1, below), disaster management as a formalized body of knowledge originated in the late 1980s, and was reflected in a global UN “Disaster Management Training Programme”, carried out in many developing countries in the early-mid 1990s.

Disaster management’s key components of “prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery/rehabilitation” are the “action clusters” for the cycle’s flow of activities, and are defined below:

- Prevention:* Activities to provide outright avoidance of the adverse impact of hazards and related environmental, technological and biological disasters.
- Mitigation:* Ongoing structural and non-structural measures undertaken to limit the adverse impact of natural hazards, environmental degradation and technological hazards.
- Preparedness:* Activities and measures to ensure effective response in an emergency and its impacts, including timely and effective early warnings and the temporary removal of people and property from a threatening location.
- Relief/response:* The provision of assistance and/or intervention during or immediately after a disaster to meet the life preservation and basic subsistence needs of those affected.
- Recovery:* Decisions and actions taken after a disaster with a view to restoring living conditions of the stricken community, while encouraging and facilitating adjustments to reduce disaster risk.

Figure 1
The Disaster Management Cycle⁶



While the concepts of prevention, mitigation, preparedness, relief/response and recovery continue to be viewed as useful operational terms, the “disaster management cycle” is less favoured today, than it was ten years ago. This reflects recognition that the activities described can occur concurrently as well as sequentially. It also merely reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of the discipline.

In the late 1990s, increasing disaster losses worldwide highlighted the need to move beyond “managing disaster events” and to better address the risk processes that drive them in the first place. It was in this context that greater concerted emphasis was placed on “disaster risk reduction” rather than “disaster management”. Unlike the disaster management cycle, effective disaster risk reduction roots itself in careful risk identification and analysis – before implementing prevention or mitigation actions.

Disaster risk reduction (disaster reduction)

The systematic development and application of policies, strategies and practices to minimize vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout society, to avoid (prevent) or limit (mitigate and be prepared for) the adverse impact of hazards, within the broad context of sustainable development.

These working definitions help explain why disaster mitigation has not received greater programmatic priority despite a growing profile in disaster management in southern Africa. Mitigation is largely a developmental activity, which, through sustained initiatives, minimizes the likelihood of a disastrous occurrence by reducing either the intensity of external threats (hazards) or the vulnerability of those at risk.

Mitigation in drought-prone areas assumes both the certainty of climate shocks as well as the uncertainty of their occurrence, scale and intensity. In these communities, mitigation efforts do not necessarily hinge on the outcome of the seasonal SARCOF⁷ forecast, but assume the occurrence of a significant drought event every 3-7 years. Mitigation activities have the potential to be wide-reaching, and may include social programmes to support child-headed households, strategies that diversify livelihoods beyond dependency on agriculture and creative approaches to rainwater harvesting.

In this context, as mitigation activities are not linked to any specific or impending disaster event, they should be the responsibility of governmental line ministries and development non-governmental organisations. However, despite considerable support for the introduction of disaster management programmes in many southern African countries in the 1990s, and despite the clear links between poverty and disaster vulnerability, few developmental players, including government line ministries, nongovernmental organisations and external assistance partners, have actively integrated disaster mitigation into their programmes as a developmental priority.

This is partly explained by the reluctance of developmental partners to engage with “disaster management” and its components, as this identifies the “disaster event” as the conceptual anchor around which all activities are organised. Indeed, the organisational logic behind the flow of activities from prevention to recovery may be entirely relevant to disaster management and civil protection professionals whose primary mandate primarily is to anticipate and respond to disaster events. However, it does not engage readily with the region’s development practitioners whose orientations focus on

continuing processes to reduce poverty, promote sustainable livelihoods, encourage improved natural resource management or facilitate democratic governance. From this perspective, “disaster management” has been viewed as an “event-driven” field, focused primarily on preparedness and response to emergencies, rather than a “process-oriented” discipline, and thus largely irrelevant to current development priorities.

These mismatched perceptions have discouraged shared ownership of the “disaster risk and “vulnerability” processes that ultimately drive the scale of impact in the event of a natural or other shock. There may be institutional clarity that preparedness and response components of a disaster event are the responsibility of national, provincial and municipal disaster management authorities. However, considerable ambiguity remains with respect to organisational responsibilities for ongoing mitigation activities.

The implementation of disaster mitigation functions requires budgetary and programmatic shifts in the ongoing core functions of line departments that are not automatically funded from humanitarian appeal monies. However, as such activities are often viewed as non-core “extras” by line departments, they are not actively pursued. This results in developmental players apportioning “disaster mitigation” responsibilities to disaster management structures, who themselves have little authority or influence over the line functions, programmes and budget allocations that truly shape patterns in prevailing social and environmental vulnerability.

The consequence of this for disaster mitigation, is that despite encouraging rhetoric, resources are seldom made available during an actual “disaster event” to promote ongoing reductions in developmental vulnerability. However, because “disaster-related” activities are not viewed as core functions of line departments, important vulnerability reduction opportunities are also not taken up developmentally. Mitigation, the most critical element of disaster reduction for reducing recurrent risk, is thus divorced from both the management of the disaster event, as well as the management of the risk processes that drive local and regional crises.

Over recent years, global efforts to focus on “disaster risk” rather than “disaster management” provide increased opportunity for government line departments and other developmental partners to engage with ongoing risk reduction as an integral aspect of sustainable development and promotion of more resilient livelihoods. However, while these efforts may address the conceptual barriers to ongoing developmental risk reduction, their budgetary implications pose considerable implementation constraints for resource-poor southern African governments.

Under conditions of fiscal austerity, the diversion of resources to mitigation activities is accompanied by a political risk of diminishing the stature of an immediate priority in favour of averting a future uncertain event. This partly explains a general political reluctance to invest scarce resources to minimize the impacts of future “unknowns” in favour of visible disaster relief in times of crisis – when there is unchallenged justification and humanitarian need, along with the strategic opportunity to generate political capital.

In fact, one unfortunate legacy of southern Africa’s protracted relief operations of the 1990s has been the complicated interaction between food relief and political processes. In some countries, government’s humanitarian obligation to alleviate suffering has been misused for patronage, with an implicit expectation of reciprocity at the polls. In contrast

to leadership that, in the past, gave primacy to disaster relief, responsible governance today prioritises opportunities to reduce disaster risk through partnership, and not relations characterised by patronage and dependency.

Redefining external assistance priorities

These interactions between “patron” and beneficiary are not limited to the relationships of national governments and their constituents. They also apply to links between external assistance partners and their southern African clients. Similarly, the “institutional homelessness” of disaster mitigation in the mandates of disaster management authorities and government line departments is also illustrated in the division between external development support and relief assistance patterns.

During the past ten years, few bilateral and multilateral external assistance programmes in southern Africa have given explicit priority to the promotion of disaster mitigation as an integral and cross-cutting component of development support. This is largely due to pervasive organisational compartmentalism that separates external emergency humanitarian assistance operations from bilateral and multilateral development programmes. These highly fragmented “assistance silos” such as “Natural Resource Management”, “Governance” or “HIV/AIDS” have great difficulty accommodating cross-cutting sectoral fields, let alone programmes that “bridge disasters and development”.

There have of course been notable exceptions to this general trend. They include sustained international support to strengthen and improve the early warning and food security monitoring capabilities of SADC’s Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Coordinating Sector, which hosts the region’s food security early warning unit. Other efforts have focused on regional food security training programmes, a once-off two-three year community drought mitigation programme, as well as a once-off three-year regional disaster mitigation programme.

Considerably greater external support has been extended to the establishment of national disaster management coordinating structures, particularly in Lesotho, Mozambique and Zambia, and to initiatives to strengthen SADC’s Disaster Management capability.

If external support for mitigation has been significantly lacking in the region’s bilateral and multilateral assistance programmes, then this is even more apparent in the region’s current humanitarian crisis. As recently as 9 January 2003, US\$ 352 073 733 were pledged through the United Nations Southern African Inter-Agency Consolidated Appeal process of a total US\$ 611 340 268. This represents approximately 58% of all humanitarian requirements sought.⁸ However, only the food sector has been significantly supported, with around 65% of total needs covered by donor contributions. Food-related pledges comprise US\$ 329 504 879 (94%) of all contributions to-date, with pledges so-far for health, water and agriculture only achieving 12%, 14% and 30% respectively of sector-specific assistance sought.

No contributions were recorded for sectors addressing economic recovery and infrastructure, education, family shelter/non-food items or protection/human rights.

In many ways, these facts place in stark relief the rhetoric on disaster reduction and its practical reality. While international best practice in disaster reduction repeatedly

underlines the need to reduce chronic risk factors that increase disaster vulnerability, and while it is clear that significant factors underlying this year's famine-related losses are HIV-associated combined with failed governance, international humanitarian support continues to follow its established "African" pattern, that is, to provide food relief.

In this context, it is unsurprising that there has been little serious local investment in disaster mitigation in southern Africa. How can this be otherwise when mitigation remains categorically excluded from high profile humanitarian operations that present strategic and institutional opportunities to better reduce disaster risk and vulnerability?

Building opportunities out of obstacles

Perhaps the discouraging levels of international support for the current southern African humanitarian crisis present an almost perverse opportunity for the region to take greater responsibility for its own disaster risk, by underlining categorically that past levels of international assistance are unrealistic, even for significant humanitarian emergencies.

Across the region, there is a quietly growing capacity in a range of disaster risk sciences, from climate forecasting to livelihoods assessment and water resource management. In a number of academic and research institutions, disaster-related research and teaching are taking place - largely without external assistance, sustaining and extending their capacities by supplying services generated by local consumer demand, and not grants from donors. Similarly, there are national disaster management authorities and centres that provide an institutional mechanism for ongoing disaster reduction advocacy.

The current crisis, by underlining cross-sectoral links between food insecurity and a range of other risk factors, provides an impetus for greater multi-disciplinary collaboration, as well as increased ownership of risk reduction processes by a wider range of interest groups. If, as we have seen in this crisis, human hardship and suffering are attributable more to political and socio-economic factors than weather conditions, then the challenge is to address these persistent drivers of disaster vulnerability through ongoing regional, national and local initiatives.

It also presents the opportunity for southern Africa's bilateral and multilateral development partners to seriously reconsider their medium and long-term assistance priorities. "Silo-oriented" fragmented development support that does not factor in disaster reduction will not achieve sustainable outcomes in a region facing the reality of recurrent climate shocks and pervasive social and economic vulnerability.

Indeed, without innovative strategies that build political commitment, financial support and programmes that integrate development and disaster reduction imperatives, the optimistic visions generated at last year's WSSD will remain wishful rhetoric, and not become a reality for southern Africa - not today, and not tomorrow.

¹ Urban Jonsson, UNICEF Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, *Southern Africa: Year-ender 2002 – New thinking needed on food security*, UN OCHA Integrated Regional Information Network, 20 January, 2003

² UN Regional Interagency Coordination Support Office, *Southern African Humanitarian Crisis – update 10 January 2003*,

³ F Cuny, *Disasters and development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983

⁴ A Sen, *Poverty and famines: An essay on exchange entitlements*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981

⁵ ISDR, *Living with Risk: A global review of disaster reduction initiatives*, International strategy for disaster reduction, Geneva, 2002, pp 337-342

⁶ Ministry for Provincial Affairs and Constitutional Development, Government of South Africa, *Green paper on disaster management*, February 1998

⁷ Southern African Regional Climate Outlook Forum

⁸ UN Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Support Office, *Southern African humanitarian crisis update 10 January, 2003*, <<http://www.reliefweb.int>>