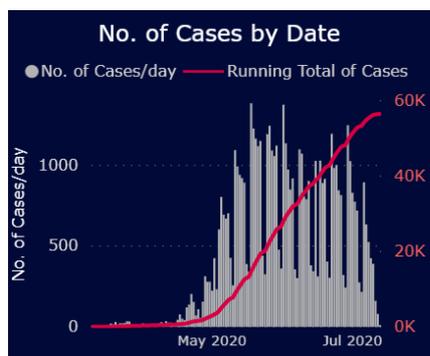


## The paradoxical inseparability of water, fire and disease in the Urban South

Lesley Gibson, 20 July 2020



The 2019 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction<sup>1</sup> opens with the headline “Surprise is the new normal” and most of us will agree that 2020 has proven this to be true. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March and since then the virus has reached virtually every country. Combined with the challenges of climate change, the resilience of the Urban South is being tested and when it comes to water and fire, the hardships inflicted on impoverished communities across Cape Town seem to be about “not enough” but also “too much”.

Winter has arrived in the Cape and Eskom, the South African power utility, has struggled to keep up with demand. Load shedding has been implemented which increases the chance of fire as people resort to unsafe heating and cooking practices. Recently reintroduced curfews mean people are spending more time at home indoors and, with the cold weather, they are having to heat their homes to stay warm. On top of this, homes are built close together which increases fire spread risk<sup>2</sup> and the density of homes make social distancing during lockdown difficult<sup>3</sup>.



The arrival of intense winter storms has led to flooding in informal settlements as rivers have burst their banks, and localised flooding caused by a build-up of uncollected refuse has been wide spread. This water excess is a far cry from the droughts recently experienced by Capetonians, yet the challenges faced by residents of townships and informal settlements are remarkably similar in both situations. During the drought, limited water access points meant long queues for an unreliable water supply. During the pandemic, the shared water and sanitation facilities may be hot spots for virus transmission. Therefore inadequate water provision represents a risk to residents in both scenarios. As with the drought, residents of more affluent areas,

although badly impacted, had resources which provided a buffer from the most severe impacts.

The Cape Town example highlights that:

- 1) The challenges faced by the developing world during the pandemic are compounded by inequality, and marginalised urban communities are disproportionately and differentially impacted.
- 2) The risks of water, fire and the pandemic are paradoxically yet inexorably linked.

The Sendai Framework advocates for disaster resilience through a “Build Back Better” approach after disaster. As climate change increases the prevalence of droughts and intensity of storms, impoverished communities are likely to have their resilience severely tested in the future. Viewing the risks presented by fire, water and disease as intertwined and inseparable will allow governments and local authorities to finally be able to take a holistic view on disaster. Through directed and honest community driven approaches, maybe, just maybe, we will be able to start to build back better. With fewer surprises.

<sup>1</sup> UNDRR (2019), Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, Geneva, Switzerland, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR).

<sup>2</sup> Gibson, L., Cicione, A., Stevens, S. & Rush, D. Under review. The influence of wind and the spatial layout of dwellings on fire spread in informal settlements in Cape Town. *Fire Safety Journal*.

<sup>3</sup> Gibson, L. & Rush, D. Novel Coronavirus in Cape Town Informal Settlements: Feasibility of using informal dwelling outlines to identify high risk areas for COVID-19 transmission from social distancing perspective. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*. (2020). <https://doi.org/10.2196/18844>.