Responding to Concurrent Disasters: Lessons Learnt by Social Work Academics Engaging with Flood Survivors during a COVID-19 Pandemic, in South African Townships

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Abstract: The devastating effects of the recent floods in several townships in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa demanded an urgent humanitarian response. The extent of the flood disaster prompted both practicing social workers and social work academics to plan and provide psychosocial services for affected communities. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the situation in the process of engaging communities which were affected by the floods. Services that were rendered, due to necessity, included, although not limited to; trauma debriefing, grief and bereavement counselling, securing safe shelters for displaced individuals, social relief, and social security referrals. Framed within autoethnography, in this chapter we share our experiences in preparing for and responding to the needs of the communities compromised by pre-existing socio-economic and health vulnerabilities. Moreover, we report on how trauma-informed social work principles were challenged by unconducive settings common during disasters. These yielded significant lessons, particularly for social work academics. The experience of working with flood survivors forced us to rethink and redefine community engagement in academia that challenges the "ivory towers" approach to education. The field work asserted the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems in social work interventions alongside "flexible ethical" practice. The field work required us to center the peoples' interests, cultures and values in their intervention strategies. Furthermore, it unveiled that social work services are ineffective without strong participation and partnerships between social workers, community leaders, caretakers, and members and without inter-stakeholder collaborations. Lastly, we argue that for social workers to be relevant and effective, their intervention should be community-centered and context relevant.

1. Introduction

The Global Agenda for social workers continues to be driven by the priority needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities. "Social workers and social development practitioners are in the frontline to alleviate the hardships and challenges that people, communities, and societies face" (Lombard 2015, p. 482). With the rapid, widespread and intensifying climate change in every region and

across the whole climate system, Dominelli (2012) established the green social work (GSW) framework in 2012. This framework prioritizes social work interventions in the context of global disasters, climate change, and other crises. It calls for social workers to respond to needs, especially of disadvantaged populations, before, during, and after disasters.

On 11 April 2022, the flash floods severely damaged South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province, destroyed thousands of homes and infrastructure and claimed hundreds of lives. As of 22 April 2022, at least 435 fatalities had been confirmed around the province, and there were still others missing. It is one of the deadliest natural disasters to strike the country in the twenty-first century and the deadliest since the floods of 1987, with a single day's worth of rain totaling 300 millimeters (Bouchard et al. 2022). Subsequently, the floods were declared by the then premier of KZN as a Provincial State of Emergency. Notable, the floods happened when South Africa was still under the National State of Disaster as declared by the government because of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic,

In this chapter, as the authors, who are social work academics, we use collaborative autoethnography to reflect on our interactions with flood survivors from five South African townships during the (COVID-19) pandemic. The townships in which we are basing our reflections include Inanda, Ntuzuma, Marianhill, Tshelimnyama, and Nazareth. Floods and landslides hard hit these communities, and most resided in areas with pre-existing socioeconomic challenges. While this chapter focuses on social work during and post flood disasters, we also recognize the role of social workers in the prevention and management of disasters (Dominelli 2013; Shokane 2019; Willett 2019; Wu 2021).

The main functions of social workers during a disaster are the provision of relief and support, restoration, resettlement, and enhancing resilience. According to Van Breda (2018), building or enhancing resilience becomes a priority in less-resourced communities, such as in South African townships. At the heart of resilience building are "multilevel mediating processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity" (Van Breda 2018, p. 2). Makhanya and Zibane (2020); Mkhize et al. (2014) emphasized that for African communities, the mediating processes should be rooted in indigenous, context-relevant knowledge and practices. Such assertions are stimulating current debates and an increase in research that focuses on the local knowledge and practices that enhance resilience in the face of adversity (Smith and Nguyen 2021; Van Breda 2018; Vo 2015). Against this backdrop, in this chapter, we embraced purposeful learning and affirmation of African indigenous knowledge and practices throughout our interactions with flood survivors, resulting in unique findings discussed in this chapter. This chapter begins with an introduction that briefly describes the context of our chapter. It is followed by literature on flood disasters and COVID-19, as well as a brief history of South African townships and social work practice during disasters. Furthermore, we explore the methods that framed our reflections. The

majority of the chapter focuses on the lessons learned throughout our intervention. The lessons include the manner in which trauma-informed social work principles were challenged by unconducive settings common during disasters, rethinking and redefining community engagement by academics, the importance of integrating African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) in social work interventions, and lastly, the value of partnerships and inter-stakeholder collaborations. *Ilima*, *ukugida*, and *Ubuntu* are some of the indigenous African practices that were incorporated during social work interventions. The analysis and discussion sections specifically clarify and elaborate on these indigenous terms. As authors, we contend in the conclusion that social workers' responses to disasters should be community-centered and context relevant.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Flood Disaster and COVID-19

According to the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster (UNISD) (United Nations International Strategy on Disaster Reduction 2019), disasters can be either (terrorist attacks, mass shootings, racial/ethnic riots, etc.) or natural (hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, volcanoes, etc.) and are all sudden, destructive, and a significant cause of loss of life and livelihood. Although this chapter gives the aforementioned UN definition that classifies floods as natural disasters, this presentation is in no way intended to disregard the rising views, such as those that consider floods as being man-made. Floods are thus accepted in this chapter as both a natural and man-made disaster. This position is our way of expressing their intention for the Green Social Work's preventative elements.

The effects of disaster exposure on mental health are far too frequently disregarded. In a quantitative study conducted in South Korea in 2005, Chae et al. (2005) compared respondents who had experienced a disaster with those in the control group who had not; those who had experienced the flood disaster indicated harmful impacts in their mental health. Their results confirm that the residents in the disaster-exposed group would experience higher levels of stress, and other psychosocial challenges compared to those who were not exposed to disaster.

Natural disasters in the sub-Saharan region are now more regular, and calamities related to climate change that were once considered to occur only once every century are now happening more frequently and with more disastrous effects (Bouchard et al. 2022). Increasing temperatures, more frequent and severe droughts, floods, and tropical cyclones are some of the destructive repercussions of climate change that are the subject of the 13th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) (Zhenmin and Espinosa 2019). The aforementioned authors indicate how the World Bank had issued a warning that, if not prioritized, climate change would continue to disproportionately have a detrimental impact on developing countries. As predicted, Cyclone Idai in 2019 killed nearly three million people in Malawi,

Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, serving as a stark reminder of the impact that extreme weather occurrences are already causing on people's lives and livelihoods (ibid). Fundamentally, climate change prevents us from achieving other SDGs because it has the ability to compromise communities with inadequate resources, which worsens mental and emotional health, food insecurity, and water scarcities. The situation will worsen until all global partners commit to "fulfil their obligations to help developing countries get the support they need to address climate change" (Zhenmin and Espinosa 2019, p. 496).

In African countries, climate change is becoming a development impediment, worsening water management issues, decreasing agricultural production and food security, raising health risks, damaging critical infrastructure, and disrupting the delivery of basic amenities like water and sanitation, education, energy, and transportation (Zhenmin and Espinosa 2019). Climate change remains an ever-present global risk. However, the number of people dying from exposure to natural hazards, such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods, has greatly dropped, particularly in developed countries. This is due to advancements in disaster detection and monitoring systems, which confirms Dominelli's (2013) argument that disasters do not discriminate but highlight the prevailing societal injustices.

Floods are the most common natural hazard on the African continent, frequently leading to both property damage and fatalities. Their occurrence simultaneously as a calamity like COVID-19 would undoubtedly provide many difficulties, especially for underprivileged people. Likewise, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all nations, undoing the progress made towards achieving some global goals, such as the 1990s treatment for all—to make HIV testing and treatment widely available to persons with HIV by the end of 2020, and stop the further transmission of the virus (UNAIDS 2020). In several of the recorded cases, inadequate treatment supplies were lacking during the prolonged country lockdowns, and some patients chose to forgo their treatments because they ran out of food (UNAIDS 2020). Consequently, due to infrastructural damage, which may potentially hinder the delivery of medical services and access to them, flooding can cause more widespread disease outbreaks (Suk et al. 2020).

The simultaneous occurrence of disasters in diverse locations across the continent has caused researchers' attention to change from studying single hazards to studying multiple hazards and disasters. For instance, Kassegn and Endris (2021) looked into the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19, desert locusts, and floods in East Africa and found that the three threats worsened already-existing food shortages and weakened livelihoods and development gains that had taken years to achieve. Communities experience disasters when hazard exposure occurs in the absence of sufficient material or non-material capabilities, thus increasing risk.

Living in urban areas has become a daily risk for many in Sub-Saharan Africa. Satterthwaite et al. (2019) refer to poor urban planning, inadequate infrastructure, poverty, illiteracy, limited access to water, health care, and proper sanitation as daily

hazards. Satterthwaite et al. (2019, p. 113) note that "the boundary separating extensive disasters and everyday risks can be fuzzy" and argue that essentially "disasters waiting to happen". Therefore, addressing these disasters separately is necessary to reduce cumulative exposure. Essentially, climate-related disasters intersect not only with co-occurring disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but the political and governance structure, the socioeconomic circumstances of individuals, and their capacity for adaptation (Bouchard et al. 2022). The historical and political context of townships in South Africa highlights these intersections.

2.2. The Historical Context of South African Townships

In South Africa, "the term 'township' has no formal definition but is commonly understood to refer to the underdeveloped, usually (but not only) urban, residential areas that during apartheid were reserved for non-whites (Africans, Coloureds and Indians) who lived near or worked in areas that were designated white only" (Permegger and Godehart in Zibane 2017, p. 43). For African residents, townships were areas of exclusion, oppression, control, and containment of all aspects of the life of the residents (ibid). In spite of the demise of apartheid, townships continue to be an architectural remnant of the Apartheid government, whose racial segregation policies were regulated by the Group Areas Act.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was established in 1994 after the democratically elected government came into power with the intention of minimizing the negative socio-spatial, economic, and political effects of apartheid by addressing socioeconomic disparities and reducing poverty in formerly oppressed and disadvantaged groups. One of its requirements was to restructure housing policies to offer free accommodation to families that past administrations had shut out. However, the development of new townships and the growth of existing ones have largely replicated historical spatial dynamics when the poor resided farther away from the city (Zibane 2017). Our responses to the flood disaster considered how socio-spatial inequalities and variations in wealth, age, education, and resource availability affect communities' ability to respond to disasters.

2.3. Social Work Practice during and Post Disasters

Social work scholarship on disasters in developing countries is growing (Koketso et al. 2021; Shokane 2019; Machimbidza et al. 2022), with implications for practice (Kreitzer 2012; Ng 2012), education (Wu 2021), policy (Mangubhai et al. 2021) and research (Maglajlic 2019). Like Ray (1999) we do not consider social work practice, education, policy and research as separate categories and similarly reject the bourgeois "universities as ivory towers" mindset, which leads to detachment from communities, even during times of disasters. Inspired by Ray (1999, p. 25), we appeal for "fresh thinking . . . [and] willingness to abandon the traditional categories that drive our thinking about who does what in the economy". Similarly, Watermeyer

(2019, p. 332) posited that for occupational relevance, community engagement for academics "is increasingly less an optional, more a mandatory".

In non-disaster settings, social workers perform a variety of roles within their micro/mezzo/macro scope of competence. Notably, Levenson (2017, p. 1) argued that "trauma-informed social work incorporates core principles of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment". The additional tasks that social workers have to perform following disaster-related trauma can quickly become overwhelming, despite their expert knowledge of stress and trauma therapy as well as experience in public health systems, hospitals, schools, and social welfare systems (Dominelli 2013). According to Harms and Alston (2018), disasters may cause a variety of losses, including those connected to death and the attendant grieving, as well as losses unrelated to death, such as lost relatives, property, belongings, and jobs.

In a recent Zimbabwean qualitative study, Machimbidza et al. (2022) highlighted the various roles of the social worker during different disaster phases. These included the educational role for disaster preparedness, counseling, social aid, and protection available during disaster responses, and last but not least, the provision of advocacy and follow-up care during disaster recovery. However, they mentioned some social workers' reluctance to engage in disaster work. Sim and He (2022) stress the importance of reflecting on the practice process and less on the outcome, echoing Vo's (2015) conclusion that the method of service delivery is just as crucial as its results. Despite their micro-level and non-indigenous focus, Maglajlic's (2019) reviewed studies summarize critical elements of good practice for social service practitioners during disasters.

As the first best practice, responding to the genuine needs of the populace in a disaster-affected area is essential, with emphasis on bottom-up approaches to assessing survivor needs and responding fairly, with immediacy. The majority of locals were pleased with the assistance provided in the wake of the tsunami, while others remarked that those with connections in the proper places received it more quickly (Dominelli and Ioakimidis 2015). Second, service providers must have comprehensive knowledge of the current resources and capacities of neighborhood social service agencies and other partners, as well as knowledge of the sustainability of such support, whether it comes from local, national, international, governmental, or non-governmental sources (Drolet et al. 2021). Third, in order to provide relevant and timely support, social service providers in emergency situations must take the time to coordinate and collaborate with one another, regardless of their level or type (Alaniz 2012).

The fourth is that, in order to provide disaster social services that are organized and pertinent locally, the community that has been affected by the calamity needs strong local leadership that is community oriented (Tosone 2019). Importantly, services must have a degree of flexibility and responsiveness at the local level. Fifth, it is important to ensure that accurate and timely information is available and exchanged and that such communication is available through various channels

(Wang et al. 2019). The ability of practitioners to assist clients and avoid or lessen their own secondary stress is significantly impacted by their level of emotional readiness, which is a critical component of social work practice, more so during disasters (Rosenberg et al. 2022).

3. Methodology

We adopted collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al. 2013) as our methodological framework in this chapter. Collaborative autoethnography is a qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic (ibid). Autoethnography, without the term "collaborative", is a combination of autobiography—the study of self-experiences and ethnography—a study of habits and culture. Autoethnography is an intriguing method that is increasingly utilized to study social phenomena through the lens of the author/researcher's personal experience (Wall 2016), although it is criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized (Atkinson 2006; Wall 2016).

Chang et al. (2013) added the element of "collaboration" to the concept of autoethnography. Roy and Uekusa (2020, p. 384) argued that this method is convenient and ideal for qualitative researchers during "unprecedented times", in which conventional methods of collecting data are either disturbed by disasters or other limitations. Likewise, we selected this method in order to journal our professional and personal lessons, as social work academics, during the floods response that was compounded by COVID-19 in South African townships. This method was also chosen as it is aligned with the approach and processes adopted by a team of academics, interns, and students who organized themselves into a flood response team. We, the chapter's authors, are also members of a larger response team that reports to the Institute (MA'AT).[1]

As authors, we collaborated beginning with the identification of the flood-affected communities and continuing through the MA'AT's planning of the flood responses. This comprised the procedure for requesting entry permission from the appropriate ward councilors, "*izinduna*" (traditional headmen), and other crucial role players.

Collaborative autoethnography afforded us an unconventional opportunity to become researcher–practitioners. A crucial component of our flood response journey as reflective professional social workers was taking notes and keeping journals about

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[1] Inspired by working with vulnerable communities in more than 10 African countries, the MA'AT Institute was established within the School of Applied Human Sciences within the College of Humanities of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to specifically advance Afrocentric thoughts and the provision of African-centered psychosocial services to communities experiencing adversities. The services of MA'AT are multidisciplinary and often involve social work academics, social work interns, social workers, educational and clinical psychologists and psychology interns.

our intervention methods. Notably, as part of our own debriefing sessions, after contact with the community, we comparatively journaled our experiences through a self-reflexive method. Authors such as Chang et al. (2013) and Roy and Uekusa (2020) have critically discussed collaboration's advantages and adverse dynamics during autoethnography. Specifically, Chang et al. (2013) argued that self-reflection methods such as autoethnography are popular due to their individualized approach, which is also likely to expose the author's vulnerabilities. The comparative reflections allowed for the multiple voices and perspectives to be included in the research, and this increased the source of data and information from a single researcher to multiple researchers (Roy and Uekusa 2020). As a result, the comparative perspectives this heightened the rigor of the information we recorded in our journals. Unlike single-authored autoethnographies, as collaborative auto-ethnographers, we combined our energy and data to create a richer pool of data from multiple sources (ibid).

Adapting work by Chang et al. (2013), we designed Figure 1 below in order to highlight the circular steps of research design and the importance of collaboration during the process of this research method:

Based on Figure 1, we followed a similar pattern to journal our reflections, as the main source of data, systematically and collaboratively. We needed to employ collaborative autoethnography due to its postmodernist lens, which rejects the generally accepted intellectual assumptions of knowledge generation and makes room for nontraditional ways of knowing and knowledge generation (Wall 2016). Using this method, we could critically journal our collective experiences of responding to concurrent disasters, COVID-19 and floods, with indigenous communities in townships.

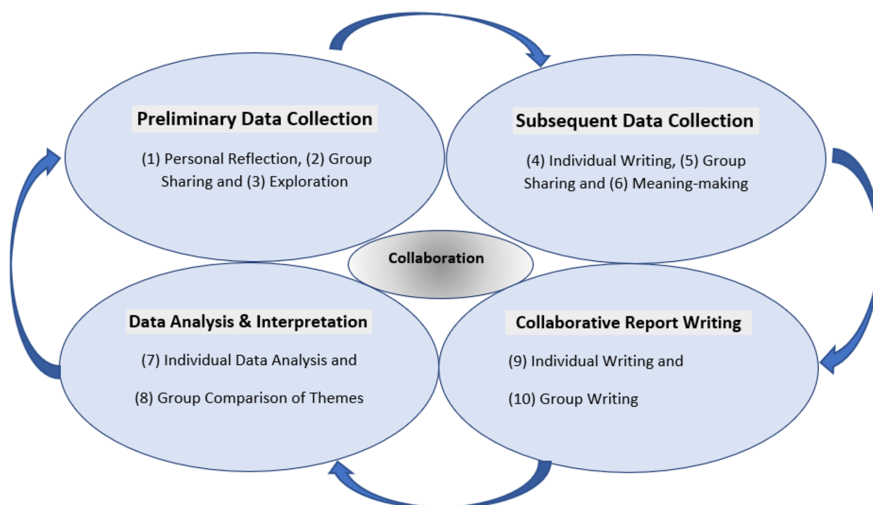

Figure 1. The Circular Iterative Process of Collaborative Autoethnography. Source: Adapted from Chang et al. (2013, p. 24).

The comparative journaling that we performed after each intervention was carried out concurrently with the examination of our reflections. In order to collaboratively create meaning, we used the model from McPhail-Bell and Redman-Maclaren (2019) to categorize similar sentences into groups, produce codes on an individual basis, and then work together in person during meetings. We had sections for, among other things, reflections on our own vulnerabilities, reflections on the current condition of the community members, reflections on newly formed partnerships and alliances, reflections on collaborations, reflections on the community's reaction to our intervention, and so forth. This categorization of our reflections enabled us to learn lessons from each other and, lastly, to provide the below narrative accounts of our collective experiences. Moreover, the collaborative analysis of our reflection ensured the trustworthiness of our findings.

4. Lessons Learnt

In this section, we present our reflections as per the above methodology. Specifically, we provide reflective discussions on rethinking and redefining community engagement; trauma-informed social work principles in unconducive settings of concurrent disasters; integration of Indigenous knowledge systems in social work interventions; and lastly a reflection on the importance of strong partnerships and inter-stakeholder collaborations.

4.1. Rethinking and Redefining Community Engagement during Disasters

Community involvement with townships is nothing new for us. Since 1996, students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) have worked with the Bhambayi residents through the non-profit organization UKZNCORE (UKZN Community Outreach and Research). Using African-centred psychological interventions, MA'AT Institute was most recently founded to address COVID-19 and any other related psychosocial difficulties. We can attest that providing psychosocial services to communities during a global pandemic provided us with some expertise in dealing with disasters such as floods. However, we did not anticipate that disasters of this magnitude would occur simultaneously.

4.1.1. Continuous Engagements with Communities to Build a Reputation

As a result of media updates, warnings spread quickly, and regular activities such as school were suspended. It became impossible to respond sooner on the ground, since several roads were flooded, and some bridges collapsed or were in danger of collapsing. In particular, after seeing broadcasts of displaced residents, we all experienced panic that was tinged with guilt. Even if some of us experienced water shortages from busted pipes and electricity outages, it did not compare to what was being experienced by flood survivors. However, we did continue to communicate over the phone with community workers, initially in Inanda, which was one of the affected communities.

4.1.2. Engaging Communities Proactively

On 19 April, we learned that 10 families from Inanda had reported the deaths of family members, with 1 family allegedly losing 3 members in a single instant. Two toddlers and four other people had not been located. Over 300 people were impacted, over 70 households had their homes washed away, and other people reported losing belongings and having property damaged. Despite our initial sense of confidence, this was overwhelming given our COVID-19 experience. We agreed to move forward as a group without receiving any financial assistance.

4.1.3. Flexibility and Acknowledgment of Historical Context

We chose to attend the memorial ceremony that had been planned for the grieving community members as our point of entry. The Chairperson of the memorial service officially announced our attendance at the memorial ceremony. This announcement came as a big surprise to other participants, including social work practitioners, since they were not accustomed to "academics" being at the forefront of the emergency response. The tent was crowded with government representatives, as well as representatives from non-governmental and religious organizations. Given the generally somber atmosphere, it was initially difficult to identify the families who had lost a loved one.

4.1.4. Engaging Communities with Cultural Sensitivity and Humility

We met the relatives toward the end of the memorial service. They were ostensibly still in shock, and some were still in denial. We consoled them, and out of respect for some of the survivors who could not even walk without help from family members, we had to kneel down to be at their level. All of their names and mobile numbers were written down. Some took our private cell phone numbers, since they had misplaced theirs and it was impossible for us to contact them. As uncomfortable as it was to share private cell phone numbers, the nature and extent of the disaster made it impossible for us to be aloof. The situation was critical, and some people yearned for closure because their loved ones' whereabouts were still undetermined. One woman came up to us and begged us to assist in finding her son, who had been missing for nine days. She mentioned how she wanted to mourn the loss of her son, "like the others", and retrieving his remains was important to her.

4.1.5. Engaging to Empower

Due to our mobility, we were also contacted by a leader of one temporary shelter that housed a lady who was expected to graduate with a Bachelor of Education degree. The request was for us to help make her day special. We then lobbied using social media and our connections. Many people came forward, some offering to dress her up, while someone offered to buy a cake for the graduation party, and more came forward to arrange decorations, catering, etc. As social work academics, we agreed

that we would coordinate the program and use the opportunity to restore cohesion and inspire in the midst of adversity. Unfortunately, the graduation ceremony was canceled due to a protected strike, which was a huge disappointment for all of us, but more so for the young lady.

4.1.6. Engaging with Leadership Participation and Support

One of the highlights of our engagement was to be on the ground with our deputy vice-chancellor. He participated in planning our interventions, was present in the communities, and provided us with the funds required for our response. His involvement is inconsistent with the sentiments of Watermeyer's (2019, p. 332) respondents, who "spoke of a lack of institutional interest [and] acknowledgment".

4.2. Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Social Work Interventions

Our fieldwork revealed the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems in social work interventions alongside "flexible ethical" practice. Upon our entry, in some of the community halls, we were met with apprehension, with some individuals unwilling to work with us, alleging to have been used for publicity stunts. Therefore, we had to be clear about our role and the importance of our engagement. Offering social work services in the aftermath of a disaster and to individuals who have lost everything meant that they were placed in a position of vulnerability. As a result, they were often visited by different philanthropists, some who were genuine and some who were not offering anything but were tokenistic for the sake of being seen as doing something. Consequently, the overexposure of displaced community members to different stakeholders, whose promises were often not fulfilled, made them cautious and reluctant to receive people who came into their shelters offering assistance.

As we provided "non-tangible" disaster relief (trauma debriefing) to people with tangible needs such as blankets, food, and homes, we had to sensibly negotiate our entry and employ emic strategies to win their hearts. Our competency and fluency in the IsiZulu language and Zulu cultural practices were instrumental in breaking the ice, facilitating communication, providing stress relief, and building and enhancing community resilience. Inspired by the work of Zibane (2017) and other Afrocentric writers (Asante 2003; Mbiti 1990), some of the strategies that were employed were the use of "*ingoma*" (traditional and religious song/chants) and *ukugida* (traditional Zulu dance) which we used to uplift their spirits and to allow for the expression of feelings.

Biko (1987, p. 42) states that "nothing dramatizes the eagerness of the Africans to communicate with each other more than their love for song and rhythm". In song lies Africans' rare ability to find humor and creativity in impossible conditions (Ibid). Zibane (2017), who reflected on her experience of growing up in the township during apartheid, discussed how music and rhythm were important tools to overcome the hardships brought by apartheid. She discussed how music was everywhere,

featuring in all their emotional states, experiences, occasions, and aspirations (ibid). "Any suffering experienced in the township was made much more real by song and rhythm" (Biko 1987, p. 42). Similarly, Flandreau (2016) confirms that traditional African songs are spiritual.

Ingoma is indeed "a way through which African people learn about their social world, express emotions, and relax" (Zibane 2017, p. 31). Lebaka (2015) also confirmed that song is one of the instruments that African people have utilized to worship and make meaning of their feelings. Following the indigenous activities, we observed more receptiveness to our individual or group therapy. The experience of using IsiZulu Language, *ingoma* and *ukugida* as part of our disaster relief intervention was very insightful. It reasserted a need for social workers working with indigenous communities to employ decolonial practices and to put the African interests, values, and culture at the center of their interventions. A significant lesson is that as much as social work is a universal profession, the Africanization of interventions is crucial within indigenous settings.

4.3. "Ilima" and "Ubuntu": The Importance of Strong Partnerships and Inter-Stakeholder Collaborations

Ilima is an IsiZulu expression that refers to collaboration during a ploughing process. The etymology of this term emerges from an IsiZulu word which is *-lima*, a communal ploughing process. The reflections shared below illustrate how we, alongside other stakeholders, managed to exercise *ilima* during our flood response. We did not literally plough communally, as per the literal definition of the term *ilima*, but we managed to work with other stakeholders in order to respond collectively to the devasting effects of *floods*. The use of the term *ilima* in referring to collaborative work is common for IsiZulu-speaking social workers in the KZN province of South Africa. The collective response (*ilima*) that we employed, alongside other stakeholders, undoubtedly resonated with the principles of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* Zulu expression has gained recognition in international social work federations such as the International Federation of Social Work. This term refers to "interconnectedness", and "humanity", but it is sometimes defined as I am because we are (Van Breda 2018). As argued by Afrocentric researchers, Mbiti (1990); Mboti (2015); Eze (2017); Gade (2017), African people are characterized by *Ubuntu-*.

The diverse nature of the challenges that faced the displaced community members required collaboration (*ilima*) and interventions embedded in the ethos of *ubuntu* from multiple stakeholders.

4.3.1. *Ilima* in Action: Collaborative Engagement and Coordination

There were changes every day. More fatalities were noted, and more homes had collapsed. Holistic safety, health and otherwise, was a serious concern in crowded venues, especially for women and young children. When we arrived at the halls, we discovered that there had been little coordination and that donors

were trickling in slowly, given the lack of an organized strategy. We arrived there with interns (psychologists and social workers) in one hall, but we were unable to start psychological debriefing, since the people there were starving. When we saw how desperate for food they were, we hurried to the store to obtain ingredients to make sandwiches and juice. Surprisingly, an NPO (non-profit organization) was serving food when we got back. They were ecstatic when they spotted us approaching the people who had been stationed in the hall and thought we were in charge of the operations. From then onwards, we coordinated our services with them as partners. The lack of coordination of the *ilima* process necessitated us, as social work academics, to employ our professional roles as brokers in order to connect the community members with philanthropists who were offering hot meals, water, sanitation, blankets, mattresses, etc.

4.3.2. Hierarchy of Needs in a Disaster Situation: Collaborations and Entry

Notably, we discovered that there was inconsistency in terms of food availability in different temporary shelters. Some community shelters had an abundance of donated food, while some did not have anything due to unreachability and the remote location of their shelter. We then called a nearby businessman we had met at another hall, who kindly offered to lend a gas stove. Notably, some shelters possessed uncooked donated food. Our fluidity between different shelters meant that we were able to advocate for those who were not yet in receipt of other basic donations. It became eminent that the role of a social worker as a broker is therefore crucial during disasters. While we were using our MA'AT Institute as our vehicle for community engagement, we visited communities with a preconceived plan of offering trauma debriefing. Undoubtedly, psychosocial support was required, but as social workers, we were confronted by the reality that some of the displaced community members in neglected shelters were reasonably unable and unwilling to participate in group work activities without being offered food. Some would report that they had their last meal on the previous day. It was undoubted that psychosocial services were also required, as these community members were suffering from trauma, bereavement, grief, and shock. However, their physical needs, such as food provision, water, sanitation, blankets, mattresses, etc., took priority compared to psychosocial interventions. As Lester (2013) states, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs argues basic needs are categorized into five categories: physiological, safety and security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. According to this theory, physiological needs (the lowest in the Hierarchy of Needs) were more powerful (prepotent) than the higher needs. This theory was actualized and realized through our engagements with communities displaced by South Africa's floods. Our presence in the temporary shelters/community halls meant that we were able to organize and coordinate services in order to prevent repetition.

It was only after the fulfillment of physiological needs (food provision) that psychosocial interventions such as trauma debriefing became possible and meaningful.

4.3.3. Ethical Dilemmas, *Ubuntu*, and Collaboration

As mentioned earlier, individuals and families were displaced and left without basic needs. Our humanness and our value of *ubuntu*, in some instances, conflicted with our professional code of ethics. Notably, our professional code of ethics as social workers prevents us from offering personal donations or gifts to our clients, as this could have ethical implications. However, the magnitude of the problems was bigger than our fellow *ilima* role players. As an ethical dilemma, we all individually donated baby foods, unused clothes, and other basics that we had in our homes. It was, however, important that we did this while we attempted to balance morality and the reputation of our social work profession. It is also important to note that we were intervening to these communities, but we were also emerging from the same communities. Our empathy and acts of *ubuntu* were motivated by the realities that we were co-facing with these communities; the interconnection was inevitable. As social workers, we also did not have electricity and water in our own homes because the basic infrastructure of the City of Durban was also destroyed by the floods. During collaborations with stakeholders, we became coordinators, empathetic human beings, and professionals who were unsure whether to engage in philanthropy or strictly uphold the rigid "ethics of non-gifting to clients", even in an era of crisis. Based on these engagements, it was clear that the devastation of the floods called for collaborative humanitarian interventions; it called for *ubuntu* and empathy because individuals, families, and communities were affected holistically by the floods.

As a lesson, it became eminent that as social workers, we are instrumental in coordinating and linking people with required service providers.

4.4. Trauma-Informed Social Work Principles in Unconducive Settings of Concurrent Disasters

As argued earlier, the devastating effects of the floods in several townships of the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa called for urgent multidisciplinary responses from multiple stakeholders, including ourselves as social work academics. One of the readily available responses in the time of crisis (and that we were ready to offer, as academics) was our expert skill and service of trauma debriefing. However, offering trauma debriefing in an era of pre-existing challenges and concurrent disasters, COVID-19, and floods was a complex challenge for us. Notably, according to Levenson (2017, p. 1) "trauma-informed social work incorporates core principles of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment".

The spatial displacement of our clients meant that they and their families were housed in community halls and other temporary accommodation centers. Consequently, these inevitable challenges meant that principles of trauma-informed

social work, such as safety and choice, were compromised. A safe physical space for rendering individual and family trauma debriefing services was unavailable in community halls. Our clients were each using a corner with their families to mark their territory in the community hall. This impacted our primary method of intervention, which was group work. On the same note, Boshoff and Strydom (2017, p. 447) argue that "group treatment brings with it the possibility of the restoration of meaning in social participation", but also exposes the vulnerability and emotional safety of the service users. Bearing in mind the principles of trauma-informed social work, such as choice and safety, the above narrative indicates that these were indeed compromised.

Other than the effects of the floods, which were the main cause of trauma, the COVID-19 pandemic also compounded our challenges in rendering trauma-informed social work. The reality that our clients were housed in temporary accommodation centers meant that we had to be conscious of the COVID-19 health protocols as well. However, the magnitude of the floods resulted in the destruction of water supply infrastructure in some facilities. This then posed a health threat to our clients and ourselves. Navigating this dual crisis was a difficult moral and ethical dilemma for us. We were conflicted about whether to deal with multiple flood-related crises that faced our clients or to mitigate health and safety concerns, such as damaged water-supply infrastructure, which was beyond our control. However, our psychosocial interventions were necessary because we managed to "break the silence" and reconfigure a sense of community through our engagement. The reality of working in a context of dual disasters enlightened us about the flexibility and post-modern nature of social work (Hölscher 2005). In an era of climate disasters, it becomes difficult to employ and/or adopt all the protocols of trauma-informed social work, but the reality often calls for a context-specific intervention.

5. Recommendations and Conclusions

Our reflections unveiled that social work services are ineffective without strong participation and partnerships between multi-sector social workers, community leaders, caretakers, and community members and without inter-stakeholder collaborations. As a result, social work processes and indigenous processes such as coordinated *ilima* are crucial and must be institutionalized when dealing with climate change disasters and negotiating entry into communities. Stakeholder mobilization and community involvement committees exist at our university. Members of this group come from a variety of academic fields, including engineering, urban planning, drama, media studies, and many others. This committee includes the MA'AT Institute. Ensuring that this committee responds to disasters as a collective is one of the important lessons learned. The disaster response will be more comprehensive and successful in this approach. In turn, the university will be more relevant and gain recognition and respect as a key contributor to community building. We value the finances set aside for a Disaster Response team by the College of Humanities'

Deputy Vice Chancellor, who offered leadership during the MA'AT Institute's flood response. This dedication is one of the ways to make sure that the university team participates in the prevention, recovery, community reconstruction, and promotion of sustainable livelihoods.

These reflections illustrate that social workers need to be context specific, conscious of indigenous ways of living, and center the peoples' interests, cultures, and values in their intervention strategies. Indigenous knowledge systems should be integrated into the social work curriculum in the era of common climate-associated disasters. As academics, we recognize the need for curriculum transformation and research on African indigenous practices that are relevant to social work. In this way, we will respond to a call for a decolonial social work theory and practice raised during the "*#Fees Must Fall/#Rhodes Must Fall*" strikes of 2015.

It is now apparent that dealing with concurrent disasters, such as floods and COVID-19, provides significant lessons for the profession of social work. The topic of green social work and disaster-specific social work should be strengthened in order to tackle unpreparedness and raise awareness about the catastrophes of climate change that are now becoming common occurrences across the globe.

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