

Fire Hazard and Vulnerability in Imizamo Yethu Informal Settlement

Location:	Imizamo Yethu informal settlement, Hout Bay, near Cape Town
Date:	2004
Sector focus:	Settlement fire hazard
Spatial focus:	Community

Bibliographical reference

H. MacGregor, N. Bucher, C. Durham, M. Falcao, J. Morrissey, I. Silverman, H. Smith, and A. Taylor, *Hazard Profile and Vulnerability Assessment for Informal Settlements: An Imizamo Yethu Case Study with special reference to the Experience of Children*. Cape Town: DiMP, University of Cape Town, March 2005.

Abstract

This research was undertaken by Cape Town University disaster risk science honors students to assess living conditions and perceptions of fire safety issues in an informal settlement. It was carried out shortly after a devastating fire that destroyed 1,200 homes and affected 5,000 people in a population of 8,000.

The settlement, though formally part of a local government jurisdiction including several White, higher income settlements (Ward 7 of Hout Bay), is effectively self-governed by street committees organized by SANCO, the South African National Civic Organization. Historically the “civics” arose in the 1980s as an integral part of the struggle against apartheid, and, in particular, were involved in organizing rent strikes and other kinds of actions to make urban South Africa “ungovernable.”

The settlement dates from the 1990 conversion of some forest reserve land to a site and service settlement scheme for Black South Africans who worked as domestic workers in the homes of Whites and in the growing fishing industry of Hout Bay. In the years running up to the formal end of apartheid, the settlement grew very rapidly as “influx controls” were less and less strictly enforced.

There have been many settlement fires in Imizamo Yethu, as elsewhere in informal settlements in urban South Africa. This study followed a catastrophic fire to survey resident perceptions of hazard, vulnerability, risk, and capacity to prevent, respond to, and to recovery from fires.

Background, secondary data, including a data base on disasters in South Africa, were used to good effect, together with a variety of key informant, individual household, and group interviews. Children and youth were also specifically given voice in interviews held at schools.

Recommendations were general, constituting a “framework” for more pro-active community based fire prevention.

The multiply layered methodology in this study as well as the complex current political situation and earlier political history make this study vital reading for those working in densely populated, informal urban settlements, especially in post-conflict and conflict situations.

Technical description

Hazard/risk type: Informal settlement fire

Type of assessment: Hazard and vulnerability assessment in the context of settlement history and profile of living conditions and social relations

CRA process

Collection of secondary data, followed by semi-structured household interviews, group interviews at schools, and focus groups; report back to community leaders.

Methods used: (1) Secondary data and literature review (the latter specifically concerning child protection). Data on fires was provided by MANDISA, the Monitoring and Mapping of Disaster Incidents in South Africa project run by University of Cape Town’s Disaster Mitigation for Sustainable Livelihoods Programme (DiMP). (2) Semi-structured household interview. (3) Semi-structured group interviews stratified as follows: Group of people who had lived closest to the February 2004 fire; residents in the settlement for more than 5 years; residents for less than 2 years; (4) Focus group discussions.

SANCO provided local guides and translators. In addition, there were group interviews with primary school aged children at a local school, where drawing exercises and discussions were used to elicit perceptions of why fires occur and, more generally, what hazards children face. Interviews with parents and teachers took place during this school visit. High schools aged youths were also interviewed at a local high school.

Was livelihood analysis part of the process? No. However, income and livelihood strategy was seen by residents to bear directly on the causes of fire. The linkage made was between lack of access to land for building homes in lower density neighborhoods, lack of services that encourages illegal and potentially hazardous electrical connections, and cooking and lighting arrangements that rely on paraffin (kerosene) cooking stoves and candles. The 1996 and 2001 census provided employment statistics and the number of female headed households.

Was external specialist knowledge introduced? Yes, in the form of the MANDISA data base and results of a South Africa Bureau of Standards study that found nationwide 3 out of 5 paraffin cooking stoves were unsafe. A number of institutional interviews were conducted with the Child Accident Prevention Association of South Africa, local disaster management and Fire Services. Interview teams therefore had this external expert information to introduce where appropriate in focus group discussions and interviews.

Vulnerability analysis

While risk factors for home fires did emerge from interviews, these were situational (e.g. whether an adult male in the household would come home intoxicated at night) or related to cooking and or wiring arrangements. No systematic correlation of socio-economic or demographic variables was investigated (e.g. income and income sources, household size and composition).

Capacity analysis

Resources available: *Financial resources:* Cape Town University. *Human resources:* University of Cape Town specialists and graduate students, SANCO staff, support by a Cape Town based planning NGO, Development Action Group (DAG). *Local resources:* Very well organized and active, though unaccountable street-based committees within the SANCO structure; churches, and other civil society organizations.

Limitations to capacity: Marginalization with the council politics of White-dominated Ward 7; internal political competition and friction between two civil society organizations claiming to represent the residents of Imizamo Yethu (SANCO and Sinithemba); feelings of helplessness and dependency widespread among the residents of the informal settlement.

Action planning and implementation

What actions were actually planned? Recommendations were general and mapped out a “framework” that would provide preconditions for a community based fire hazard mitigation approach. This would involve (1) an educational campaign among residents that would encourage them to set aside feelings of powerlessness and “take ownership of risk;” (2) resolving or at least channeling friction between the two principle civil society organizations so that the settlement can speak with a unified voice; (3) establishing working relationships with government agencies at the Provincial level (Western Cape Province).

The survey found a rudimentary and ad hoc system for fire prevention, response, and recovery. This would be the basis of an improved system. They found that one of the major causes of fire was the fact that drunken men would return home at night and try to cook, triggering fires when they fell asleep whilst their food was still cooking. Street committees currently warn men if they find out about nocturnal drunken cooking attempts, and have the power to expel repeat offenders from the settlement. Fire response currently is based on neighbors using stored domestic water to try to stop the fire, and then helping remove valuable items if evacuation is necessary. Recovery is currently based on friends and relatives taking in homeless victims plus charitable aid from the wider Hout Bay community, Red Cross, and compensation payments from the government.

What actions were actually carried out? Following the drafting of the report, students were required to present their risk assessment findings to a group of community leaders in Imizamo Yethu. In addition, the students developed a poster summarizing key findings which they presented to SANCO.

Have these actions turned out to be sustainable? Follow up action was left in the hands of local leaders, and there has been none as September 2005.

Were there any unanticipated additional benefits of the actions? Youth and children gained more visibility and voice. A wider range of hazards emerged from interviews with them, and the need for safe recreation areas, more day care facilities for children with working parents, and volunteering policing of streets at night and on weekends emerged as priorities, quite apart from the fire safety question.

Were there any unanticipated negative consequences of the actions? The perception that the study was allied with SANCO may have exacerbated tensions with Sinithemba.

Limitations on action/ sustainability of actions: The history and long term consequences of the apartheid system bear heavily on action and sustainability of action. First, the settlement geography, especially its density is a challenge. Secondly, both apartheid and, ironically, the hegemonic power of the ruling ANC party, have created a sense of powerlessness and dependency, albeit for different reasons. In the first case, one was the victim of an all-powerful-seeming police state. After 1994, there have been very high expectations on the part of citizens for a rapid improvement in access to public services, land, and employment. These were expected to come from the “top down” as the result of political action by the ANC dominated government.

Indicators

MANDISA,¹ a disaster incident data base maintained by Cape Town University, provides the monitoring and statistical basis for determining whether or not settlement fires in Imizamo Yethu will be less or more frequent in the future. However, at several places the report mentions limitations on the primary data on fires and the causes of fires. For the MANDISA data to serve best as an indicator of the impact of new policy and practice, these data problems would have to be addressed.

Without the integration of the study findings into local risk management plans it is unlikely that any risk reduction will be accomplished. However, since the students provided a follow up presentation to Imizamo Yethu community leaders, it is likely that some of the issues presented were considered more seriously.

Contextual notes

Existence/ role of prior or contemporaneous conflict? (1) The recent history of the anti-apartheid struggle that formally ended in 1994 is mirrored in the name of this informal settlement, Imizamo Yethu which means “through our collective struggle;” (2) some of the residents of Imizamo Yethu are migrants from Angola, Zaire, and Namibia, where civil war and political instability may have been the reason for their international migration; (3) There was friction between two major civil society organizations in Imizamo Yethu.

Role of displacement/ relocation? The settlement history of South Africa is very complex, involving forced removals of non-Whites from various urban areas, and, since the last few years before the end of apartheid, the rapid move of many low income Black South Africans back into urban and peri-urban settlements in order to be nearer places of employment. This situation was and still is further complicated by low productivity of Black African agriculture in the former “communal areas,” environmental degradation in these areas due to population densities created by apartheid forced re-settlement, and lack of infrastructure.

Role of prior disaster & prior recovery attempts? Imizamo Yethu has a long history of settlement fires, and the “Great Fire” of Saturday 7th February, 2004 was very much on people’s minds and fresh in their memories. This fire destroyed 1,200 homes and left 5,000 people homeless.

Significant historical, geographic, economic, political, or cultural issues that influenced this instance of CRA and its consequences? The severity of fires in the settlement is less in the winter when structures and surroundings are damp. Thus the seasonality of this part of South Africa is a factor. The settlement history and politics mentioned above is a powerful influence, as is the low income and scarce livelihood options facing the majority of residents. Municipal and ward level local politics are also important since in greater Cape Town, as in other major urban regions in South Africa, council boundaries that formerly enclaved White and Black communities were redrawn from 1996 and now cut across race and class lines. Nevertheless, although ward level planning and allocation of resources is egalitarian on paper, the reality has not yet caught up with intentions.

Strategic notes

How has this practice of CRA influenced change in policy and practice at the national level?

As this was a student learning exercise by the Disaster Risk Science Honors students it would be difficult to assess whether the CRA influenced changes at the national level.

How has this practice of CRA influenced change in policy and practice at local level? Local government officials were encouraged to participate in the research process, by acting as informants and facilitating initial meetings with other relevant stakeholder. It is possible that through their involvement in the research process local level capacity development may have occurred, although it would be difficult to assess.

How has this practice of CRA influenced the level of organization and solidarity in the locality where it was carried out? Yes, in the short run.

Less divided along class, gender, age, ethnic lines? Unlikely.

More divided along these lines? The unintentional impression given that the interview team was identified with SANCO, one of two opposed civil society organizations, might have increased tensions and divisions.

Are the people living in this area more able to speak out on issues that concern them? Unclear from report; however, children and youth may feel more empowered. Youth interviews at the high school voiced the opinion that youth should be represented on committees in the settlement.

Have new civil society organizations been created directly or indirectly because of this practice of CRA? No, but the main recommendation was for development of the preconditions that would allow such a settlement wide, unified organization to emerge, capable of implementing an improved community based risk management system.

Lessons learned

- ♦ Participatory action research can be integrated into undergraduate teaching for the benefit of both students and host communities.
- ♦ Care must be taken with the choice of local guides and the mode of introduction into a community in order not to fall victim to pre-existing antagonisms and fissures.
- ♦ Despite the usefulness of combining teaching and research, it is difficult to provide adequate follow up to ensure that actions are taken and sustainable.

Keywords

Settlement fire, housing conditions, sanitation and water supply, informal settlement, peri urban, social movements, survey interview methods, fire prevention.

Resource person(s)

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¹ Monitoring, Mapping and Analysis of Disaster Incidents in South Africa (MANDISA); see: www.int.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=124&art_id=vn20050801095029138C792868 & www.egs.uct.ac.za/dimp/.