

SOCIOECONOMIC CRISIS

# Failing state means we have no fall backs

The floods in Kwa-Zulu-Natal and the eastern parts of the Eastern Cape illustrate numerous related features of our contemporary socioeconomic crisis.

The first is that our social and economic infrastructure, be it roads, drainage or human settlement provisioning, has not caught up with population growth, settlement patterns and the spatial reorganisation of SA cities in the postapartheid era.

Much of this infrastructure, built in the 20th century, has reached its terminal age and is in need of comprehensive replacement. Yet this seldom happens, and where repair and maintenance resources are allocated, they are in some cases unspent.

The second is that the severity of what the SA Weather

Service suggested was "exceptionally heavy rainfall" – a 10th of KwaZulu-Natal's average annual rainfall fell in eight hours – makes the likelihood of further severe episodes likely. This raises the question of whether, if similar episodes were to be experienced, our disaster prevention, response and management framework would be able to respond.

These two elements of our unfolding crisis are made more severe by state and market failures, and how these find expression at a local level. For instance, there were news reports of community groups fleeing low-lying areas to find passable roads and safer ground, ferrying the bodies of family members lost in the flooding. The reason for this was that there were no proper roads leading to many of the

destroyed settlements that might have allowed emergency response vehicles to enter these areas.

"Spatial transformation is dependent on governance," said the recently published State of Cities Report 2021, published by the SA Cities Network. At the launch of the report last Friday, many echoed this sentiment, calling for a co-ordinated "all of government" approach.

As deputy co-operative governance & traditional affairs minister Thembu Nkandimeng suggested at the launch, the design of our governance and intergovernmental relations framework may not have anticipated how our cities have changed. "The design of local government never anticipated that there would be a Diepsloot," said Nkandimeng, "nor that Alexandra would have



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expanded in the way it has."

Yet, as Nkandimeng lamented, many local authorities continue to underspend the budgeted funds that could ensure that communities and settlements are better able to withstand natural disasters and recover from their consequences.

This was not only an outcome of a system where one needed "15 signatures to spend money", but also a feature of the "contradictions and contestations within the state", as Buffalo City manager Andile

Sihlahla observed at the launch.

The informal settlements worst affected by the floods are most in need of the informal settlements upgrading partnership grant, which is intended to improve the living conditions of people in these settlements "through secure tenure, safe and reliable water, sanitation and adequate access to social services". The budget for this grant is expected to increase in the next three years by just under 5% to R9.7bn for the 2024/2025 financial year.

Ashraf Adam, CEO of the Nelson Mandela Bay Development Agency, an agency of a metro with its own persistent challenges of drought and governance failures, suggests that much like the state has outsourced technical functions, it also seems to have outsourced its "idea-making" to

consultancies and multilateral institutions, which gives rise to policy development unsuited to our concrete local experiences.

These design, governance and policy challenges do not explain on their own why sinkhole covers, bakkies, beds and lives floated away as the rains came down. What we might learn though, with or without the benevolence of non-state actors in business and civil society, is that a weak, incapacitated or failing state, at multiple levels, opens us all to the severe consequences of disasters, without the corresponding and mitigating response of an ethical, capable and developmental state.

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