



COMMENT



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## Vital to work with communities to stop killer fires

ON MARCH 11, 2017, a large fire raged through the Imizamo Yethu informal settlement in Cape Town, killing four people.

More than 2 000 informal dwellings were destroyed, while more than 97 000 people were displaced. On September 6 this year, another fire destroyed 264 dwellings and displaced 800 people in the same settlement.

Despite the media frenzy and burst of government action following the 2017 fire, it seems no lessons were learned. The destruction reaped by fires continues unabated.

The number of informal settlement fires is increasing in South Africa. Over 5 500 such fires are now reported each year. This excludes many fires residents extinguished themselves without notifying the local fire station. Almost 50% of all fire-related deaths occur in informal structures in settlements or backyard dwellings.

Given the growing number of people living in informal dwellings in the city, it is perhaps no wonder that Cape Town has become one of South Africa's most fire-prone cities and has the highest overall fire-related death rate.

In addition to avoidable deaths, such fires further impoverish already vulnerable households, indicating an urgent need for interventions to reduce the incidence of fires and proactively protect lives and property.

It is those who live in these fire-prone settlements who best understand the nature of day-to-day household activities and other factors that drive up the risk of fires.

Their intimate local knowledge must be harnessed in developing strategies to address fire risk at settlement level, involving them in seeking possible solutions. But this is harder than it sounds because communities are far from the cohesive groups we like to think they are.

Ways must be found to remove the barriers to collective problem solving, helping settlement dwellers to work together to address risk in their own communities, finding solutions acceptable and appropriate for local contexts.

Bringing communities together with local government and other role-players to share perspectives and engage around the issue of fire is an essential starting point.

When solutions are not developed in partnership with the intended beneficiaries, they generally have little traction.

In the Western Cape there is growing interest in the use of smoke alarms in informal settlements. Several municipalities and non-governmental organisations have installed alarms in selected communities over the last few years. But these were originally developed as early warning systems for formal buildings and research conducted in collaboration with a community where the technology has been tested suggests modifications are needed for informal dwellings.

Community members are not only the most knowledgeable about their risk environment, but always the first to respond to fires – yet they have limited resources.

Their ability to respond can be enhanced through preparedness strategies and capacity-building, such as providing first aid and firefighter training, especially to youths.

Such skills development might also serve to make local residents more aware of the many challenges informal environments present to firefighters so that they can better support fire response when it arrives, co-ordinated for example by specially trained local fire marshals who have an intimate knowledge of settlement layouts and the whereabouts of fire hydrants.

The City of Cape Town has launched a Fire Prevention Week this week to draw public attention to the risk of fire in the home. This is an important step in addressing the problem of fires in the city.

Let us also recognise informal communities as partners in risk reduction efforts. Rather than the largely unsuccessful top-down approach used to date, we must work with informal dwellers to understand their priorities.

More needs to be done to understand such challenges – and to work with communities to develop appropriate and sustainable solutions.

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