



Community politics: A factor eroding hazard resilience in a disadvantaged community, Imizamo Yethu, South Africa

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Abstract

Imizamo Yethu is an informal settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, characterised by abject poverty and high vulnerability to environmental hazards. On February 8, 2004, a major fire caused significant damage to the settlement's housing and infrastructure, resulting in widespread homelessness and loss of personal possessions. Despite the intensity of the event, there were minimal casualties and the community re-grouped after the fire despite overwhelming odds. What was the source of this resilience amidst such disadvantage? A survey focusing on this question was conducted in 2004 with Imizamo Yethu residents. Results identified social networks and some formal community institutions as the most significant factors enhancing respondents' resilience during and after the fire. However, the survey also disturbingly revealed that political divisions centering on a land rights dispute within the community, and on-going housing issues, were undermining community resilience. Disrupted social networks and eroded community cohesion caused by political factors have the potential to further diminish resilience against hazards in the future.

Keywords: environmental hazards, community resilience, Imizamo Yethu, South Africa

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Introduction

Recent studies and policy documents in the field of environmental hazards management have highlighted factors contributing to community vulnerability and resilience (e.g. Blaikie *et al.*, 1994 & 2004; Buckle, Marsh & Smale, 2001; Handmer, 2003). A notable literature is also emerging in the area of analysing community resilience and vulnerability to natural hazards in less developed countries (e.g. Campbell, 2001; King & Gurtner 2003; Macatol & Reser 1999; Shaw *et al.* 2003, Yates & Anderson-Berry 2004). In keeping with such research, Harte (2005) analysed vulnerability and resilience in the socially and economically disadvantaged community of Imizamo Yethu, located in Cape Town, South Africa (Figure 1). A major fire in February 2004 provided an opportunity for field research to examine the impacts of a major hazard event on the community and how it responded. While social and cultural characteristics appear to be strong countervailing forces with regard to disadvantage and vulnerability to hazards, the maneuverings of local political factions have emerged as a key factor threatening to erode resilience in this community. This paper reports the key findings from this research.

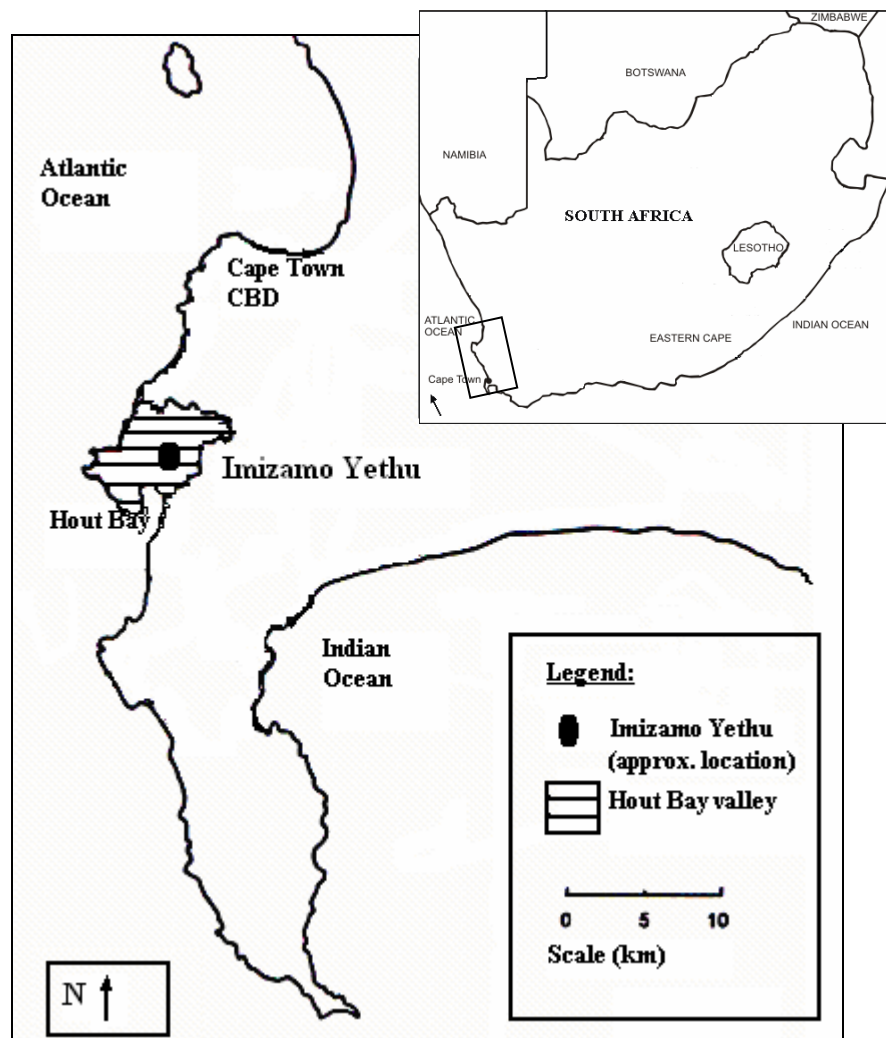


Figure 1. Imizamo Yethu informal settlement, South Africa.
(Adapted from African National Congress, 2004 and Gawith, 1996, p.79)

The Case Study Settlement: Imizamo Yethu

South African cities today are experiencing large rural to urban migration flows. In most large urban areas this has resulted in “informal” or squatter settlements around metropolitan areas that are generally characterised by poverty, a lack of formal planning, a high proportion of self-constructed shacks and a lack of infrastructure. As a consequence of these landscape characteristics, there is a heightened degree of vulnerability to a range of environmental hazards in these localities.

Imizamo Yethu was established in 1991 to house 455 squatter households from the Hout Bay valley¹. The site of the settlement comprises 34ha of land, 18 ha of which is zoned residential and 16ha that was to remain as ‘greenbelt’ or later be developed into community facilities such as schools and clinics (Figure 2). The original 455 relocated households were to be given brick houses on individual serviced sites. This development, however, did not proceed as planned. Not all of the households received a brick house on a serviced site. Furthermore, once established, Imizamo Yethu experienced a major unplanned influx of new residents (Informal Housing Sector: Public Housing, 2003). Consequently, Imizamo Yethu took on the characteristics of an informal settlement. The following sections will briefly outline the features of the local landscape salient to its vulnerability and resilience to environmental hazards.

Housing and infrastructure

Housing in the settlement is dominated by self-constructed shacks, made from plywood, masonite, timber boards, plastic sheeting, advertising boards and corrugated iron. In addition, there were approximately 100-200 brick houses complete or in the process of being built with external assistance (at the time of the fieldwork). Access is limited, with only one major road into the settlement, and few maintained roads within the densely populated site itself. Water is obtained mainly from a limited number of communal taps, which are sometimes inoperative. Electricity is available, but frequently accessed illegally by households rigging their own connections to existing lines. The key energy source is paraffin fuel, which is used within the shacks for heating and cooking. In combination, these attributes of the built environment increase the vulnerability of the settlement, notably to fire risk as a result of poor infrastructure and the nature and use of energy and fuels.

Population and Culture

There are variations in the counts of the total population of Imizamo Yethu, depending on the statistical source. These include the official 2001 South African Census data (8,052) (Statistics South Africa, 2003); Development Action Group (2003) (7,874); Informal Housing Sector, Public Housing (2003) (between 10,000-18,000). The latter figure is supported by analyses of aerial photographs of the settlement in 2000, which reveal an estimated population of 13,000 based on the conservative figure of four people per dwelling (Informal Housing Sector: Public Housing, 2003). The difficulty in establishing even basic population counts is indicative of the fundamental impediments to effective hazard management in such communities. The reliability and validity of population data for Imizamo Yethu meant that most of the data required for the present study needed to be gathered directly.

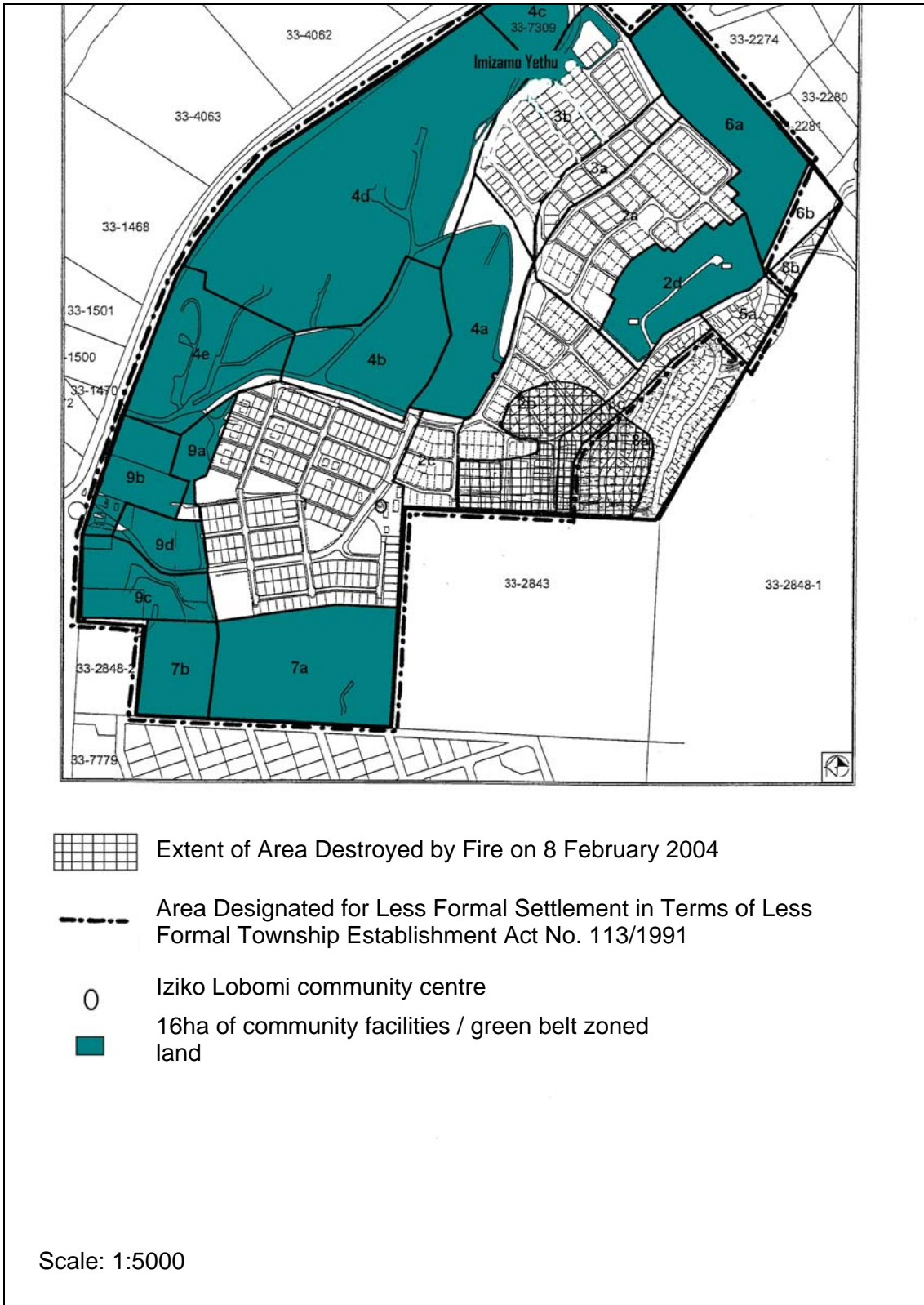


Figure 2 Land-use zoning in Imizamo Yethu
(Adapted from Public Housing Directorate, 2004)

The majority of people living in Imizamo Yethu belong to the Xhosa cultural group. Most originally migrated from the Eastern Cape to the Cape Town region (see Figure 1) in search of employment and many regularly return eastward, maintaining strong ties with family and friends. The socio-cultural networks are therefore complex systems which extend well beyond the settlement. For the Xhosa people, ancestors are an integral part of the social system. Their beliefs are particularly relevant to hazard vulnerability and resilience in that the Xhosa culture dictates that one's ancestors will be angered if one does not help immediate and/or extended family members who need assistance, regardless of the financial and material difficulties associated with rendering this assistance (Lohnert, Oldfield & Parnell, 1998; Xhosa interviewee, 2004). This cultural belief strongly reinforces the role of social networks in Imizamo Yethu's predominantly Xhosa society.

Politics

There are political divisions in the settlement that are underpinned by land rights issues. The main stakeholders involved in the 'politics' of Imizamo Yethu are the Sinethemba Civic Association (Sinethemba), the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) and the Hout Bay Ratepayers Association (HBRA). These groups are differentiated on the basis of their views on the uses of the remaining vacant land within Imizamo Yethu. These political divisions in Imizamo Yethu influence resource allocation and have an impact on community cohesion. This aspect will be particularly highlighted in this paper.

The case study hazard event: February 2004 Fire

On the 8 February 2004 a serious fire in Imizamo Yethu caused widespread damage to the settlement (Figure 3). Estimates of the number of dwellings destroyed range from 461 (Disaster Management, 2004) to 1,200 (Dreyer & Kassiem, 2004, p.1; Kemp, 2004, p.1) and for the number of people affected from 645 families (Disaster Management, 2004) to 5,000 people homeless (Dreyer & Kassiem, 2004, p.1; Kemp, 2004, p.1). The 'official' Cape Town City Council figures are that 570 dwellings were destroyed (Public Housing Directorate, 2004). The cause of the fire was not determined (Disaster Management, 2004; Mandisa Database, 2004). Despite the scale of this fire event, Imizamo Yethu remained a viable, functioning community. This was evident in discussions with residents who stated that they wished to remain in Imizamo Yethu and rebuild in the settlement. Harte (2005) reported that there had been no significant out-migration, and normal day-to-day activities had continued in the recovery phase of the fire. There were, however, opportunities for relocation. For example, housing was also available through the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) in other settlements in the Western Cape district of Cape Town (see Figure 1). Despite such opportunities, most residents appear to have chosen to remain in Imizamo Yethu (Harte, 2005). Poor economic circumstances of the residents were also a barrier to moving to other areas.

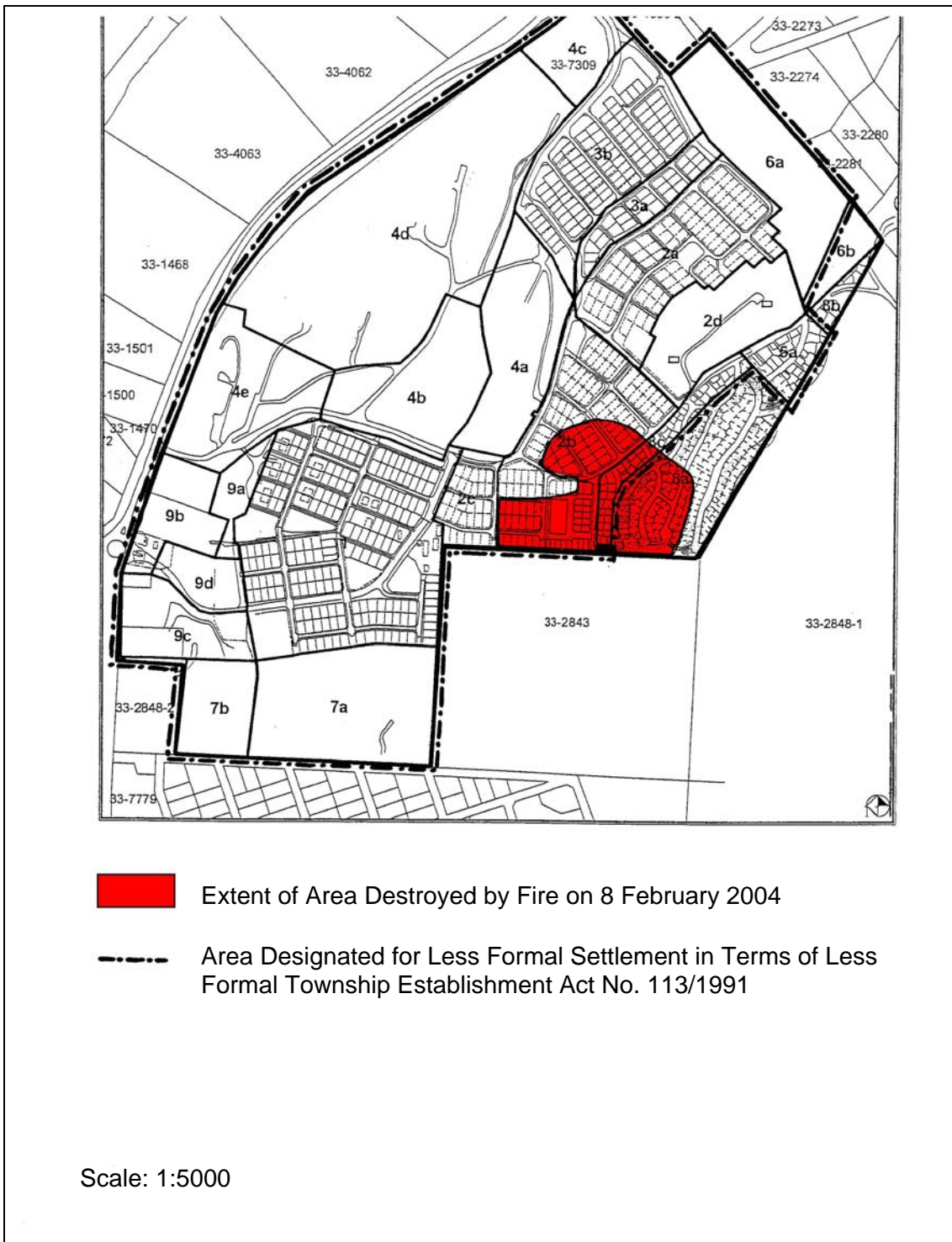


Figure 3 Extent of 8 February 2004 fire in Imizamo Yethu
 (Adapted from Public Housing Directorate, 2004)

The survey

An interview survey was conducted in Imizamo Yethu in 2004, five months after the fire event, allowing the researcher the opportunity to capture essential aspects of the ongoing recovery phase. Respondents were residents / households who had been directly affected by the February 2004 fire. Further background information was collected from representatives of “formal networks” (Department of Housing (Directorate and Informal Sector), Disaster Management Cape Town, the South African Red Cross Society, church organisations and NGOs) relevant to the recovery situation. Respondents were asked to nominate the most important factors enabling them to survive in the response and recovery phases of the fire². Primary data was also collected from field observations in the community.

Thirty people, representing thirty households directly affected by the February 2004 fire, were interviewed. The size of the sample population allowed the results to be analysed for frequencies and patterns, however it did not allow the results to be statistically generalised. Specific characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Objectively testing the representativeness of the sample was also difficult due to the uncertainty of the demographic statistics available for the community. In summary, the sample was dominated by respondents of the Xhosa cultural group, most of whom were female, unemployed and headed single-parent households. There were reportedly children in over two-thirds of the sample households at the time of the fire. Two households were supervised by children on the night of the fire. Almost one-third of respondents were reportedly in households of greater than four people on the night of the fire. Though difficult to formally establish, from discussions with the community members, the researcher concluded that this sample was reasonably representative of the wider community, but with some gender bias.

For personal safety, it was necessary to conduct the resident interviews during daylight hours on weekdays. This largely excluded interviewing people who work day-shifts during the week, perhaps adding to the gender bias of the sample. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a combination of Xhosa and English. The researcher has some fluency in the local Xhosa language, but racial differences between the researcher and respondents could have had a potential impact on the effectiveness of the survey instrument through subjectivity and biases. As a strategy to overcome this, and to minimize possible distrust and misunderstandings by the participants, the researcher worked closely with an appropriate local Xhosa individual. At the same time, however, the involvement of the local personality delivered its own set of problems. Imizamo Yethu is a politically divided community (see below), and care was taken to engage, as far as possible, an impartial community member to fulfil the role of go-between for the survey work.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the Imizamo Yethu survey sample

Total number of respondents	30
Xhosa People	28
Gender	23 female
	7 male
Largest age group of respondents: 20-40 years	13 respondents
Accommodation type (at interview)	24 shack
	4 community centre
	2 brick house
Location of accommodation (at interview)	13 outside boundaries of Imizamo Yethu
	17 within Imizamo Yethu
Households with children present in response phase	21
Single-parent households	8
Child-headed households in response phase	2
Lone person households	3
Households with more than 4 people present in response phase	9
Unemployed respondents (at interview)	15
Unemployed respondents (in response phase)	13

Factors enhancing resilience

Resilience is the ability of a community to recover and return to a sense and condition of normality following a disaster. Two of the major factors found to be prominent in enhancing community resilience in Imizamo Yethu were the operation of social networks and support from specific formal institutions and their networks.

Social networks

The maintenance of social networks is firmly entrenched in the Xhosa culture; having family and friends in the settlement was the reason given by most survey respondents for choosing to live in Imizamo Yethu. In terms of the help actually provided, the most frequent responses in the residents' survey related to family and friends facilitating rapid and successful evacuation in the response phase of the fire, and providing material, financial resources and accommodation during recovery. Comments indicated that this support was ongoing, in accordance with the cultural norm. These findings are consistent with those of Campbell (2006), Yates and Anderson-Berry (2004), Nomdo and Coetzee (2002), Shorten *et al.* (2003) and Handmer (2003) who propose that social networks are a key determinant of community resilience.

Formal networks

Only the formal networks that fostered community participation were nominated by respondents as being important to their response and/or recovery. The main institution

that was most frequently mentioned was Iziko Lobomi community centre. This is located on the main road into the settlement (see Figure 2). It provides the community with a venue in which to hold community-based activities on a daily basis, including religious gatherings, food preparation, communal meals and supporting livelihood and employment. Iziko Lobomi also provided temporary accommodation for some fire victims in the recovery phase. Importantly, in terms of hazard response and recovery, the centre facilitated access to volunteers and government agencies, and acted as a main distribution point for donations after the fire. As an existing and familiar feature of the community, it provided a trusted and practical source of support for victims. A further factor in the success of Iziko Lobomi as a support base was its location. Situated on the main road near the entrance to the settlement, it provided a visible, accessible point of contact between Imizamo Yethu and the wider community. Churches had a similar, but reportedly less visible role in recovery from the fire. For respondents, being associated with a particular church or congregation conjured up immense pride and a sense of belonging.

Significantly, while both Iziko Lobomi and the churches were credited by respondents with providing ongoing material, emotional and spiritual support in the recovery phase, support from other institutions (such as government agencies) was perceived to have faded soon after the event.

Factors eroding resilience

The survey revealed that there were also significant political forces that were threatening to undermine the factors described above contributing to community resilience.

Three Political Forces

Three clearly identifiable political forces, pre-dating the 2004 fire, operate in the community of Imizamo Yethu. Political differences are centered on a land rights dispute involving land use decisions on the 16ha of land earmarked for public greenbelt/community facilities. In the months after the fire, tension over this matter among the three political forces intensified.

Sinethemba Civic Association (Sinethemba) represents the original 455 households relocated from Hout Bay in 1991. Sinethemba's view is that it is in the interest of the original inhabitants that further in-migration to the settlement does not take place because their access to land and resources within the settlement would be potentially reduced. Sinethemba wanted the greenbelt land to be used for its original purpose: greenbelts and future community facilities, but not housing.

The *South African National Civic Association* (SANCO) is an African National Congress (ANC)³ backed civic organisation, which evolved out of various organisations during Apartheid that mobilized the masses against the state (Zuern, 2004). SANCO defines itself as "a revolutionary social movement seeking to promote people-driven and people-centered development" (Zuern, 2004, p.23). SANCO is supporting residential development on the 16ha of land zoned for greenbelt/ community facilities. Some in the wider community suggest that it is in SANCO's interest to encourage further settlement in Imizamo Yethu because this may lead to an increase the ANC's power-base in this electorate. SANCO argues that development of community facilities on the 16ha would

further isolate Imizamo Yethu from the Hout Bay community facilities, thus perpetuating social differences between the two contrasting communities (SANCO community leader, personal comment, 2004).

The *Hout Bay Ratepayers Association* (HBRA) is a community group that represents the (mainly white) ratepayers of the wealthy suburb of Hout Bay. The HBRA is concerned about crime rates and property devaluation adjoining Imizamo Yethu settlement. It is in the interests of the HBRA that the population of the lower socio-economic community of Imizamo Yethu not be increased. HBRA also wanted the 16 ha of land to be used for its original purpose: greenbelts and future community facilities, but not housing.

Escalating Tension

Shortly after the fire in 2004, the Cape Town City Council (the City), which at the time of the fieldwork was controlled by the ANC, began removing trees from the 16ha of land. The reasons they gave for this action were threefold: to decrease the fuel load and therefore reduce the fire risk; to provide temporary space in which fire victims could rebuild their shacks; and to later develop serviced sites with brick houses (Carney, 2004; Disaster Management, 2004; Dreyer & Schroeder, 2004).

As mentioned above, Sinethemba and HRBA did not want the remaining 16ha of land in Imizamo Yethu to be rezoned or developed for residential purposes. Consequently, in March 2004 Sinethemba and HRBA successfully obtained a High Court interdict to:

- Prevent the City from removing trees from the 16ha of land
- Prevent new people from settling in Imizamo Yethu
- Prevent any new dwellings from being erected in Imizamo Yethu

This High Court interdict had unexpectedly negative outcomes for the fire victims since it prevented them from legally rebuilding their shacks anywhere in Imizamo Yethu, if they had not already managed to do so immediately after the fire (including on the 16ha parcel of community land). It forced many fire victims and their households to move in with family or friends. Six respondents in the survey reported that their “temporary” shared accommodation was too small. For example, one household consisting of seven children and six adults was sharing a single shack with relatives. Seven members of another household, including an infant and other children, were sleeping on one double bed mattress and a sofa in a shack of approximately 9sqm. A common complaint was that the shared living arrangements created difficulties in their relationships with family and friends. Having to share financial and material resources, cramped living space, food, bedding and clothes for a prolonged period strained the relationships on which the social networks that create resilience depend. Accommodation arrangements resulting from the political maneuverings were, thus, contributing to the erosion of resilience in the community.

In mid-2004 the City applied to amend the ‘Less Formal Township Establishment Act’ (no 113/1991), which would overturn the High Court ruling and allow development to take place on the 16ha of community land in Imizamo Yethu. The development would ultimately provide 226 new brick houses on serviced sites (Nicks, 2004, Public Housing Directorate, 2004). Fire victims, however, were not given priority on the housing list. In October 2004 a prominent SANCO community leader told a major Cape Town newspaper that only 24 of the 570 ‘official’ households that were affected by the fire would receive new brick houses (cited in Maposa, 2004a). While the development would benefit some fire victims, the concern over allocation of housing was a cause for concern among all of the respondents interviewed:

'The community leaders all have brick houses.'

'The community leaders' brick houses take on average three weeks to be built and are strong, whereas the residents' houses are built in one week and are weak and beginning to crack.'

The suspicion of corruption and jealousy over housing allocations after the fire led to a perception of inequitable distribution of resources. This promoted feelings of distrust of community leaders and resulted in a fragmentation of the community on the basis of perceived alliances. Inevitably, this was observed to be undermining social cohesion.

Respondents also complained about the bullying tactics of some community leaders. There was an overwhelming sentiment among the respondents that they had lost confidence in community leaders. Indicative comments of this distrust made by the survey respondents include:

'The community leaders promise land to people but do not deliver'

'The [SANCO] community leaders sold the plots out from underneath us [12 years ago] and kept the money. The police have not done anything about it. We are still waiting to receive our site. We have been waiting for 12 years in this filth. Our children are born in this filth.'

'We saw people donate food, clothes and other material for the fire victims, but we received nothing. We only saw the community leaders distribute the second-hand clothes. They filled their cars and drove away ... they did not even give to the elderly.'

Such actions have created social disharmony, undermined social cohesion and therefore negatively impacted on community resilience.

Forced Relocations

In addition to the above-mentioned accommodation changes for fire victims, more residents were forcibly relocated as a result of a further housing development. In mid-2004 the City began re-developing a densely populated area in the 18 ha of residential land which resulted in the removal of households already settled in this area. A representative of the Public Housing Directorate (2004) suggested that between three and four squatter households would be displaced for every single serviced site that was developed in informal settlements such as Imizamo Yethu. The City used representatives from Disaster Management (DM) and the Southern Peninsular Municipality (SPM)⁴, as well as SANCO community leaders, to remove people from the area to some land outside the Imizamo Yethu boundary in the foothills of Skoorsteenkop Mountain, part of the Table Mountain Range. By doing this, they relocated already vulnerable residents from a familiar setting to an area that is at greater risk of fire. The *fynbos* vegetation⁵, common in the rocky terrain of the foothills, the steep slope of the land, the lack of infrastructure and the lack of road access all increase the vulnerability of the relocated families. Comments made by respondents illustrating this include:

'We have been forced to move up the mountain. There is no electricity here, so we have to use liquid paraffin for cooking, lighting and heating.'

(The respondent said that she) is very concerned about living on the side of the mountain as she remembers the fire on the Table Mountain range in 2000. She is concerned now

as she is not only at risk from fires in Imizamo Yethu, but also from fynbos fires from the mountain. She is very worried about this. (Interpreted).

Despite assertions from a DM representative (2004) that households were not forced to move, five of the 11 respondents who were living on the side of the mountain claimed that they were forced to relocate there by DM, SPM or SANCO community leaders. They said they were given no other choice but to move, or have their shack torn down and their valuable housing material damaged in the process. The forced relocations disrupted existing social networks by moving households away from their familiar neighbourhoods (people often build their shacks next to kin) and also led to social disharmony by placing households next to unknown and sometimes culturally incompatible neighbours.

Clearly, there was a serious lack of communication and consultation by the City with Imizamo Yethu residents concerning this new housing development. Most of the respondents who had been relocated were uncertain as to where they would be allowed to live in the longer term. Ten of the 11 respondents living on the side of the mountain were given incorrect and misleading information about where they would be allowed to settle. Some were told incorrectly that they would be allowed to return to their original plot of land and others were simply told that they would be allowed to return to Imizamo Yethu. Only one respondent had been informed correctly that the City was planning to relocate households away from the Hout Bay area. This lack of transparency, communication and consultation with the community disempowered community members and, again, had a negative result on social cohesion – a key pillar of community resilience, as previously outlined.

Conclusion

While there are indicators of strong community resilience in Imizamo Yethu, for example social networks and some formal institutional support, the efficacy of these is at risk. Suspicion and the perception of inequitable resource allocation, underpinned by the political dynamics of Imizamo Yethu, have caused rifts within the community. These in turn have impacted on community cohesion and therefore negatively affected community resilience. Preventing fire victims from re-establishing in Imizamo Yethu after the fire and the subsequent physical relocation of some households to the foothills of Skoorsteenkop mountain, disrupted existing social networks and increased the vulnerability to fire hazard of an already inherently vulnerable community.

Notes

¹ These squatter households had been living in five separate communities around the Hout Bay valley during the period of the Apartheid regime.

² The term “response” refers to the period during the actual hazard event and its immediate aftermath (Koob, 1998). The term “recovery” refers to longer-term adjustment involving the reconstruction of physical infrastructure, and the restoration of emotional, social, economic and physical wellbeing (Koob, 1998). Typically, in informal settlement fire hazard/disaster events, the response phase is characterised by rapid evacuation during the event, and the recovery phase (out of necessity) is characterised by almost immediate reconstruction of the built environment and search for relief assistance.

³ The ANC was the ruling political party in South Africa at the time of the fieldwork.

⁴ DM and SPM are both government agencies in an ANC-controlled government.

⁵ *Fynbos* (‘fine bush’) is the name given to the dominant evergreen, hardy vegetation of the Western Cape. *Fynbos* relies on fire for germination in the dry summer months.

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