



## Mobilising for Mitigation: Weather proofing low income homes in Suurbraak, South Africa

*Residents of in a low-income housing area in South Africa pool their money to weather proof their houses against future disasters.*

Ailsa Holloway  
Disaster Mitigation for  
Sustainable Livelihoods  
Programme (DiMP)  
holloway@enviro.uct.ac.za  
www.egs.uct.ac.za/dimp/  
main.htm

In March 2003, an 'extreme weather event', defined as a 'cut-off low', moved over the south eastern interior of the Western Cape of South Africa. The heavy rain and strong winds generated by this powerful system triggered direct rain damage, as well as widespread flooding and storm water runoff. This resulted in over US\$ 26 million direct losses, primarily to the agricultural sector and road transport network in addition to three deaths as a result of gale-force winds.

However, the most pervasive impacts on people were borne by poor communities and households, especially those who had taken occupancy of 'Reconstruction and Development Programme' (RDP) type houses in recent years. These homes, located in low-income housing developments to address massive backlogs in formal housing, were simply not sufficiently 'weather-proofed' to resist extreme rainfall events. In fact, only twelve households of the 772


households who sought government assistance after this event were actually 'flood-affected'. The remaining applications for Social Relief were largely for households who had sustained serious rain damage to their possessions and food due to leaking roofs and walls.

In Suurbraak, one of the disaster affected settlements, 201 households received a payment of approximately US \$250 from the National Department of Social Development to help with the replacement of damaged household belongings.

Many of the residents in Suurbraak realised however, that their homes were vulnerable to extreme rain events because the walls had neither been plastered nor sealed with water resistant paint, increasing the permeability of the brick walls to rain. Therefore, on the day the community received their Social Relief payments, a meeting was convened to establish a 'Building Committee' that would provide a coordinating forum for residents to repair and weatherproof their houses.



Comprising representatives of the local Disaster Committee, residents and the Swellendam Municipality, the Building Committee provided a mechanism for sixty households to pool US \$ 11,000 from the money they received from the Social Relief disbursements. This resulted in the bulk-acquisition of building materials, including 400 bags of cement, bricks, sand and water-resistant paint. The Swellendam Municipality helped facilitate the process by providing technical assistance from its engineering department, as well as storage for the materials and



transportation to Suurbraak. Moreover, local builders in Suurbraak were also asked to volunteer their expertise. Actual work to weatherproof the rain-affected homes began on 23 June 2003, exactly three months after the declared disaster.

Suurbraak's experience illustrates how collaborative partnerships between the local residents, local institutions and the local authorities can strengthen community ownership of disaster risk, after a disaster event - reducing vulnerability to future extreme weather conditions.



However, Suurbraak's response to the cut-off low also underlines the role played by pervasive social and economic vulnerability in increasing the impacts of weather and other external shocks. Nearly 70 per cent of the rain-affected households chose not to weather-proof their homes, but rather opted to address what were perceived as urgent or more pressing priorities ... replacing household belongings, such as carpets and cupboards, paying municipal debts ... purchasing needed food. This highlights the challenge in promoting long-term risk reduction in poor and at-risk communities who face daily survival pressures, underlining the critical importance of linking disaster risk reduction initiatives to efforts that reduce social and economic vulnerability.