

City disaster management Tshwane honours women

During March, a high tea was held exclusively for women at the Tshwane Disaster Management Centre (DMC) in Pretoria. The event sought to introduce the assembly of women to Tshwane's new centre, which is in ambit of the city's Emergency Management Services Department (EMSD), and to honour the role – and challenges – facing women.

Michelle Fourie, acting head of the centre, held that in many cases, disasters, such as the recent tsunami, have a more prominent effect on women.

"As the women of Tshwane, we have invited you to this function not only to celebrate a new era of disaster management in our city and in country, but also to pay tribute to our brave sisters who have survived disasters and are busy healing the world, making it a better place," stated Fourie in her key note address.

Added Fourie: "Globally, nations are now more aware of the importance of disaster planning for both man-made and natural disasters. However, following 26 December 2004, one largely unknown and barely used word gained worldwide significance overnight: tsunami. The tsunami has disempowered hundreds of thousands of people in Asia, but the aftermath will, in many cases, have a more prominent effect on women."

Barriers to female participation

Fourie highlighted the fact that "it is most often the women who go without food in order to feed their families during a disaster situation." She observed that: "In addition to these issues, women are often the victims of domestic and sexual violence following natural disasters. Reports of human traffickers taking advantage of the vulnerable situation that women and children find themselves in are prolific, which highlights the susceptibility of both women and their children to exploitation following disaster."

At the same, she added: "In many instances, female participation in disaster relief is curbed, due to certain areas being considered as bearing 'unsafe working conditions' for women. This has major implications for female survivors who require assistance from same-sex relief workers.

"Just as women are more vulnerable to the consequences of natural disasters, they are often the most innovative actors in implementing immediate relief to their families and communities."

Tshwane's preparation

Speaking on the Disaster Management Act, and on the operation of the centre, Fourie enthused that Tshwane has done a lot of preparatory work to ensure it is ready to implement the Act: "A new Disaster Management Act was implemented at local government level on 1 July 2004. Every municipality (district/metro) has two years to implement the Act."

She explained to the gathering that a new organisational structure has been approved by the council and a master plan has been developed to ensure alignment of the function with

the specific needs and demand of the capital city. "One of the stipulations of this piece of legislation requires the establishment of a DMC within the municipality."

Notably, Tshwane's centre is situated at Pieter Delpont Centre in Arcadia – adjacent to the Union Buildings – and will officially be inaugurated by the executive mayor Father Mkatshwa at the beginning of April. Fourie outlined some of the key features of the centre:

- it forms the heart of disaster management
- it will serve as both a repository and conduit of information
- it recently established an information desk, where pupils and students are assisted by a disaster management specialist in areas of research and additional aspects pertaining to disasters and disaster management
- a disaster management information system is currently being developed to assist decision makers in times of disasters and to provide a profile of Tshwane in terms of its risks and vulnerabilities
- the centre must ensure that pre-disaster risk reduction activities are undertaken in the city and that post-disaster response plans are in place. Examples of these include: aviation disaster response plans, biological chemical and radioactive response plans and crisis communication plans.

Moreover, Fourie said in her address: "In order to effectively respond to disasters, we have to realistically be aware of Tshwane's disaster management capability beforehand. A metropolitan area such as ours has a lot of resources, but these all have to be managed in a coordinated manner to really make a difference.

"Tshwane is the home of national key points, national departments, critical infrastructure facilities, embassies, high commissions, as well as some of the largest industries, shopping malls and sporting arenas in the country. Emergency planning, therefore, is one of our key performance areas to ensure preparedness in our city."

Immaculate planning

"Many more people would have died in the World Trade Centre on 9/11, had it not been for immaculate emergency planning, evacuation procedures and plans. This is our challenge – to save lives in abnormal circumstances. Disaster risk management's function is to ensure that Tshwane becomes a disaster-resilient and sustainable city."

Fourie elaborated that public participation is vital to ensure buy-in and commitment for surrounding communities and corporate entities. "Community disaster management committees are being established via the ward committee system (starting off with the most vulnerable wards). Risk assessments are undertaken and the capacity to respond to major incidents is determined."

"Should a disaster occur, the DMC will operate as a disaster operations centre, where central coordination and decision making will take place. **SP**