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*Research Article*

# Centres or Units: Making Sense of Decentralisation of Disaster Management in South African Municipalities

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## Abstract

Disasters can shake institutions and their adaptive strategies temporarily and often in the aftermath of a disaster. Disaster events, such as floods and epidemics, unceasingly demonstrate that disasters provide an avenue for a "litmus test" for institutional effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability. Therefore, this study examines municipalities' receptivity to their role in an integrated disaster management system. Based on the literature and 25 interviews in three research areas: (1) legislative understanding and legislative implementation, (2) the establishment of disaster management centres as units and (3) relevance of institutional capacity [decision-making powers of the head of centres]. This study established that the disaster management centres are established in various municipalities as units supported by Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 as amended by Act 16 of 2015. This is very solid legislative support, but practical implementation problems persist, especially concerning coordinating disaster management activities and financial accountability at the municipal level. Whereas the framework has sought to ensure a standardised method of governance, the decentralisation process has ensured disparities in municipalities' resource base and procedural practices. Deep-rooted power differences and tightly embedded hierarchies can restrict collaboration and slow decision-making. Given these findings, it is recommended that attention be directed at the following areas: i) developing more effective mechanisms for compliance with standardised disaster management guidelines; ii) planning and operationalising policies to ensure equitable resource distribution; and iii) introducing reforms into existing systems to make disaster management structures more transparent and equitable. Furthermore, the head of the centre should be fully delegated with disaster management power and authority as enshrined in Section 44(3) of the Disaster Management Act 2002, as amended in 2015, to strengthen various stakeholders' internal and external collaboration.

## Keywords

Decentralisation, Disaster management, disaster management centres, units, South African municipalities.

## 1. Introduction

South Africa's disaster management has been characterised by fragmentation and confusion among various institutions and policies, leading to inefficient and disjointed preparedness and disaster response. This disorganisation highlights the need for a decentralised authority to streamline and coordinate disaster management efforts effectively. Recent studies show that there have been significant shifts from this traditional top-down approach to a technocratic and institutionally focused approach, emphasising multilevel, multi-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder involvement, including the participation of communities at risk (Van Niekerk & Visser, 2010; Mokhele, Ncube, & Kunguma, 2024; Cabane, 2023). Moving the whole of government (WoG) closer to communities (Pietersen, 2020), the South African government adopted the decentralisation agenda on disaster management with a strategic focus on curbing the unintended consequences of hazards on local communities (Scott & Tarazona, 2011). A centralised disaster management approach in the military unit proved inadequate, as demonstrated by various disasters, among others, the Lainsburg floods in 1981 and the severe Cape Flats floods in Cape Town, Western Cape, in June 1994, leaving many individuals devastated and vulnerable (Voggel, 1998; Reid & Van Niekerk, 2008; Zuma et al., 2012; Mwera, 2013).

This unfortunate event highlighted the need to reassess the old disaster management legislation, Civil Protection Act 67 of 1977, on disaster management capacity. This was followed, among others, by developing the Green Paper on Disaster Management in 1998, the White Paper on Disaster Management in 1999, and ultimately, the promulgation of Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 in 2023, as amended by Act 16 of 2015. Therefore, this legislative transformation informed the development of the 2005 National Disaster Management Framework. This critical achievement has allowed the South African disaster management law to be recognised internationally as meeting the global benchmark for embedding disaster management in development plans. Disaster management in South Africa has been established as a public sector function within each sphere of government (Van Niekerk & Visser, 2010; Kunguma, 2020). For the effectiveness of the function as stipulated in Sections 20, 33, and 47 of the DMA, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the DMA, sections 8, 29, and 43, respectively, mandate the establishment of the national disaster management centre (NDMC), provincial disaster management centres (PDMCs) in each province, district disaster management centres (DDMCs) and metropolitan disaster management centres (MDMCs) (Republic of South Africa, 2002).

Furthermore, Section 43(4) of the amended DMA of 2015 provides that municipalities may establish disaster management centres within a municipality (Republic of South Africa, 2015). Disaster management is an "*integrated multisectoral and multidisciplinary administrative, organisational and operational planning processes and capacities aimed at lessening the impacts of natural hazards and related environmental, technological and biological disasters*" (Republic of South Africa, 2005:2). This definition highlights the critical need for disaster management to be deeply embedded within every municipality's Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process to ensure its effectiveness. From the above definition, disaster management should involve various stakeholders and be incorporated into development planning processes in every municipality. In other words, every municipality should ensure that disaster management becomes the primary function to be implemented collaboratively with various actors, such as sector departments, private sector, research institutions, NGOs, CSOs, CBOs, and the population at risk [community]) to succeed (Botha et al., 2011; Cabane, 2023). It is worth noting that the existence of the DMA and the NDMF has contributed to the transformation of local governance in handling decentralised disaster-related issues (Coetzee et al., 2013; Mamabolo & Sebola, 2021).

However, in practice, various disaster incidents demonstrate that disaster efforts in South Africa still need to be managed promptly, following a reactive approach and leaving at-risk populations vulnerable. (Kunguma, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and flooding disasters have highlighted the shortcomings of South Africa's decentralised disaster management framework. Although the DMA and NDMF are theoretically well-crafted, the pandemic has exposed egregious weaknesses in their practical application, as evidenced by Van Niekerk and Du Plessis (2020), Kunguma et al. (2021), Ngcamu (2022), and Van Zyl (2022). Such fragmentation within government spheres often

demonstrated a lack of clarity regarding direction and coordination, coupled with inefficiencies and inconsistent actions. However, despite the generally sound principles of the DMA, the pandemic highlighted how well-deserved and effectively drawn policy contrasted with practical implementation. Scholars have asserted that effective legislation cannot always be assumed to represent effective implementation (Ngcamu, 2011; Sithole, 2014; Sibanda, 2017; Oosthuizen, 2018; Kunguma, 2020). Given the practical nature of handling disasters, the available literature shows that coordination should be at the highest level for rapid decision-making (Kunguma, 2020).

Most disaster management activities, especially responses, have mainly been handled at the national or provincial level, making the role of municipalities as implementing agencies invisible or insignificant (Coetzee et al., 2013; Van Niekerk, 2014). This aligns with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report (2015), which stated that South African municipalities are detached from their legislative roles and responsibilities (UNDP, 2015). This paper argues that decentralised disaster management still needs to fulfil the expectations of moving the state closer to at-risk populations due to numerous governance challenges identified by various scholars in disaster management (Wentink & Van Niekerk, 2017; Munzhedzi, 2021). Decentralisation of disaster management is a global challenge, as Malalgoda et al. (2010). These scholars argued that the problem of decentralising disaster management requires more clarity on what should be managed nationally and locally, as discussed in the disaster management literature (Malalgoda et al., 2010). These global governance challenges could be more exceptional for the South African disaster management fraternity. Recent studies show that the difficulties are linked to the practical sense that disaster management functions and responsibilities are subject to municipalities' coordination and response (Oosthuizen, 2018; Van Niekerk & Du Plessis, 2020).

This challenge agrees with Koelble and Siddle (2014:610) that implementing the decentralisation model in South Africa is no different from the "*Rolls Royce model of local decentralisation in theory – a Ford Pinto in Praxis*." Despite the progress made by the South African government in decentralising disaster management functions across spheres of government, the critical role of municipalities as implementing agencies has not been fully realised, especially in local municipalities that are the worst (Wood et al., 2021). On the other hand, there is a rising recognition of the significance of providing municipalities with the capacity to undertake disaster management functions efficiently. To improve disaster pre-disaster phase efforts, such as prevention, mitigation, and preparedness activities at the local level, the movement towards increased capacity building represents a significant step in the right direction. These efforts are being made to improve the coordination between the spheres of government to guarantee an improved integrated and unified command approach to disaster management in South Africa. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, the paper discusses the links between decentralisation and governance through a theoretical lens, followed by a legislative framework guiding the decentralisation of disaster management in South Africa.

Moreover, this paper discusses the interconnectivity between municipal disaster management centres and sector departments, followed by the challenges faced by the decentralisation set-up of disaster management in South Africa, explains the methodology approach this paper followed and presents the data sources of our study. The results are divided into five sections that detail the feasibility of decentralising disaster management functions for municipalities, their engagement and motivation, uniformity, power dynamics, and placement of disaster management functions in municipalities, centres, and sector departments. Lastly, this paper concludes by discussing possible ways forward regarding decentralising disaster management in South African municipalities, especially on the placement of the function to retain the legitimacy of the function in centres or units.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Governance and Decentralisation: Concepts and frameworks*

Governance concerns the system, process, and institution through which authority is exercised, and decisions are prepared and implemented in each society or organisation (Van Niekerk, 2015).

This includes accountability and transparency mechanisms and ways stakeholder inputs are elicited to lead and guide various aspects of public and private operations. Decentralisation involves shifting decision-making powers and administrative duties from the centre to the lower tiers of government, such as regional (provinces) or local governments, and sometimes even lower than that, like municipalities (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020). It does so to attain responsiveness at the grassroots level, efficient delivery of services, and community participation. For disaster management, decentralisation can be framed as administrative decentralisation that involves the distribution of functions. On the political front, it empowers municipalities and communities through elected representation and local autonomy (Gumede et al., 2019). The statutory guidelines include Disaster Management Act (DMA) 57 of 2002 and the National Disaster Management Framework (NDMF) of 2005. The latter ensures that processes through which roles and responsibilities across different spheres of government govern disasters are defined (Cabane, 2023).

Section 40(1) of the Constitution of 1996 provides that South Africa has a three-tier governance system: national, provincial, and local spheres of government which are "distinctive, interrelated, interdependent" and "interlocked" with other spheres (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Siddle, 2011; Sithole, 2014; Feinstein, 2015; Koelble & Siddle, 2018). The interlocking suggests independence and equality between a three-sphere of governments, as opposed to the more overt hierarchical concept brought about by "levels" of government, as may be the case in a unitary state like South Africa (Ngcamu, 2011, p. 55). Each of these spheres enjoys, to some level, executive, legislative, and judicial powers (Feinstein, 2015). This structure is intended to ensure that powers and functions are divided in a manner that caters to the myriad needs of the population (Gumede et al., 2019). The national government sets overall policies and frameworks, such as the NDMF, which articulate critical key performance areas (KPAs) and enablers of disaster management (Mantzaris & Ngcamu, 2020). Provincial governments implement such policies at the provincial level, while municipalities account for frontline service delivery through direct community engagement. The Disaster Management Act (DMA) 57 of 2002 provides disaster management centres in spheres of government as a committee to guide disaster response and recovery.

However, some challenges arise from overlapping responsibilities and varied administrative capacities regarding the requirements for coordination across disaster management centres, including sector departments (Van Niekerk, 2014; Duze & Reddy, 2020). Moreover, this set of challenges created loose boundaries between sectors and state institutions and served a few individuals rather than collaborative efforts (Cabane, 2023). Decentralisation, while intended to enhance good governance by bringing the means of decisions closer to the people, can produce the countervailing tendencies of fragmentation and inconsistency in policy implementation. As Van Niekerk (2014) indicated, these issues might arise from decentralisation. Decentralising disaster management functions in South Africa has led to some identified issues (Pietersen, 2021). This is often found at the municipal level in resource allocation, expertise, and coordination (Mamabolo & Sebola, 2021). Although municipalities are delegated with disaster management functions, they usually need more political and administrative support capacity. While the DMA focuses on creating disaster management centres throughout the spheres of government, resource constraints and the need for intergovernmental cooperation must be adequately addressed (Sithole, 2014; Van Niekerk &Du Plessis, 2020).

### *2.2. Statutory and Framework of Decentralised Disaster Management in South Africa*

Disaster management in South Africa began to take shape in June 1994, culminating in the enactment of Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 (DMA) and the National Disaster Management Policy Framework (NDMF) in 2005. The Policy Framework (NDMF) provides guidelines on how the objectives of the DMA through Key Performance Areas (KPAs) and Enablers can be achieved in each sphere of government. The Act and the policy framework further emphasise the need to establish institutional arrangements for disaster management across government spheres (Botha et al., 2013; Sithole, 2014). South Africa's enactment of the DMA positioned it as one of the first African countries to adopt comprehensive disaster management legislation that integrates disaster management efforts into development planning (Vermaak & Van Niekerk, 2004; Botha et al., 2011). The South

African decentralisation structures are even complicated: the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) and the Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 (MSA) with the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 (MSA) outline what municipalities can do and their powers (Republic of South Africa, 1996, 1998, 2000). The 1998 MSA categorises municipalities into three categories: Category A, which consists of 8 metropolitan municipalities; Category B, comprising 205 municipalities; and Category C, comprising 44 district municipalities and encompasses areas under Category B.

Category B municipalities have full authority in their areas but share responsibilities with district municipalities, especially in disaster management as delegated by the DMA. Existing studies have identified the authority responsible for coordinating and responding to disasters within South Africa (Van Niekerk, 2014; Kunguma et al., 2021). While the DMA and the NDMF are moving from the traditional approach of responding to disasters to a more risk-reduction approach, this often works in practice against the letter of the legislature for crisis or emergency management, usually referred to as a reactive approach. Municipalities (Category B) are understood as first responders and are granted significant rhetorical authority within their jurisdictions. In this sense, rhetorical authority may be conceptualised as the influence or power given to an actor due to perceptions or claims of that actor's capacity to speak authoritatively or provide guidance rather than through any actual, substantive authority or control (Van Niekerk & Du Plessis, 2020). While the amendments to the DMA indicate coordination and implementation roles assigned to metropolitan and district municipalities, disaster management is still very often a line function of departments such as the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), thus indicating a misalignment between where the highest decision-making authority and operational placement of the disaster management function are situated in various centres or units (van Niekerk & Du Plessis, 2020).

Figure 1.1 summarises the categories of municipalities in South Africa, further divided into three categories under Municipal Structures Act 177 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 1998). Category A includes metropolitan municipalities representing significant cities with high population density and heavy economic load. Category B municipalities are smaller than those falling under Category A and can be seen as rural or semi-urban areas. Category C consists of district municipalities that take responsibility for several municipalities within a particular region and give them assistance and coordination if a specific service needs to cross local boundaries. This categorisation allows detailed responsibilities and administrative functions in different municipalities for orderly governance and delivery of services.

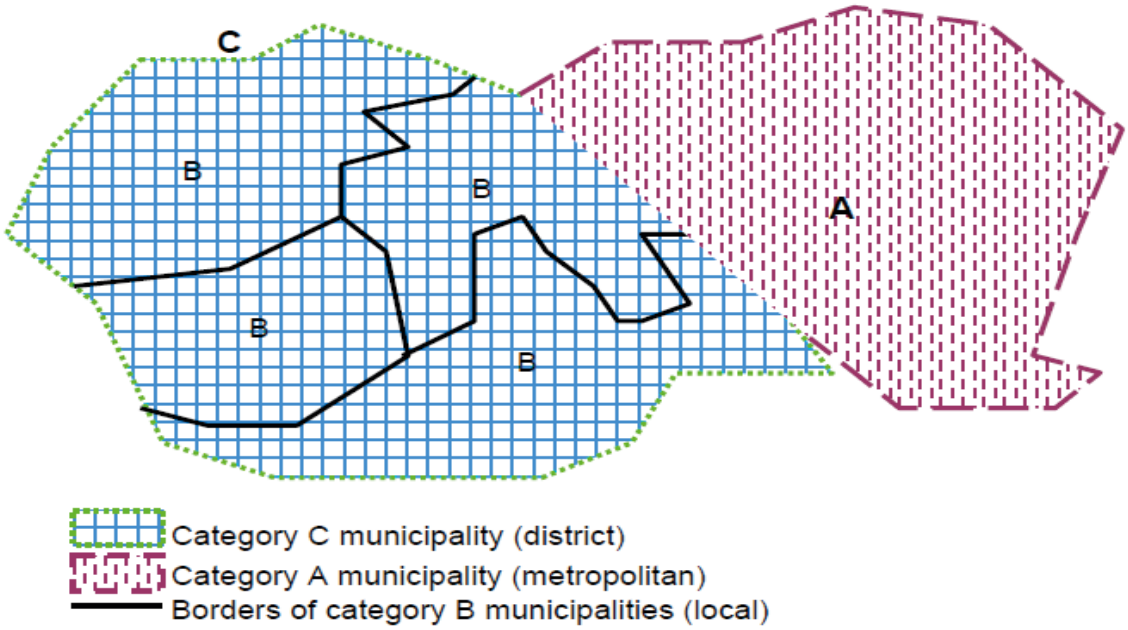


**Figure 1.1**: Categories of South African municipalities. Source: (Van Niekerk and Visser, 2010:2).

*2.3. Inter-Connectivity Between Municipal Disaster Management Centres and Sector Departments.*

Disaster management is a responsibility shared among spheres of government in a decentralised manner, as stated in Chapter 4, Schedule 4, Part A and Section 156(4) of South Africa's constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Consequently, national, provincial, and local spheres of government concurrently perform these roles and responsibilities in disaster management. Thus, the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) is responsible for leading the national coordination within South Africa during large-scale or multi-provincial disasters. On the other hand, all Provincial Disaster Management Centres (PDMCs) are charged with coordinating disaster management activities at the provincial level. While disaster management is among the issues jointly held by the three spheres of government, with municipalities operating in immediate response, the NDMC and PDMCs have vital functions in terms of strategic oversight and coordination (Sithole, 2014; Kunguma, 2020). Disaster management involves a proactive approach, and national and provincial governments play vital roles in ensuring a comprehensive response to disasters and risk reduction. Interconnectivity in municipal disaster management centres and sector departments ensures efficient disaster response (Sithole, 2014; Kunguma, 2020). Municipal disaster management centres are the central points of disaster management at the grassroots level and are responsible for local emergency planning and immediate response. These central hubs can do much better if they can establish good communication and coordination with relevant sector departments in putting forth an agenda since each brings significant expertise and resources.

For example, healthcare needs to be provided for, and the healthcare department becomes indispensable for this task; similarly, repairing and maintaining infrastructure calls for a public works department. In this way, harmony among participants is ensured, and thus, an all-inclusive approach to disaster prevention and mitigation is adopted. Although South Africa has ample legislation for disaster management, more than legal provisions, institutional systems, and political will are needed to achieve success (Van Niekerk, 2014). It is argued in the literature that decentralised disaster management will only be able to implement with participatory decision-making involving various stakeholders (Sithole, 2014; Kunguma, 2020). What is now needed is critical policy leadership, credibility, and legitimacy; it will be successful if resource allocation is made for the most vulnerable people and households (Cabane, 2023). The literature has indicated how the top-down approach to managing disasters and risks has expressed various shortcomings, especially regarding local capacity (Mokhele, Fana, & Ramolobe, 2024). This means more than national and provincial government efforts are needed because local strategies lack alignment, are embedded in the local context, or are integrated into national policies and planning (Khambule, 2021).

This gap provided an opportunity, as the observed situations proved that disasters manifest locally occasionally, and municipalities and communities are the first responders to such disasters. Thus, disaster management is a shared responsibility that should be developed through collaboration between various stakeholders from inside and outside government domains. Sithole (2014) noted that disaster management requires an intergovernmental approach in which each government domain plays a role and a distinct set of obligations to fulfil. Scholars such as Tau, Van Niekerk, and Becker (2016) asserted that cooperation is required to facilitate resource sharing, critical for reducing disaster risk and all aspects of response and recovery. As a result, any weakness or ineffectiveness in one domain can collapse the entire system, as occurs in various municipalities (Sithole, 2014). To further improve the collaboration between different spheres of government and other stakeholders, mechanisms for sharing expertise should be established at the provincial and local levels (Duze & Reddy, 2020). These two spheres may also consider Organising disaster assistance response teams and other specialist teams composed of professional and technical experts to support one another during disaster response and recovery, thus including local communities and all other relevant stakeholders (Botha et al., 2011; Kunguma, 2020; Kunguma et al., 2021). Thus, exploring methods and data collection, as discussed in the next section, is essential for understanding how these collaborative mechanisms can be effectively implemented.

### *2.4. Challenges in Disaster Management to South African Municipalities*

South Africa's disaster management landscape suffers from a fragmented institutional framework that complicates coordination and response efforts (Cabane, 2023). The Disaster Management Act (DMA) 57 of 2002 and the National Disaster Management Framework (NDMF) 2005 establish a multi-tiered disaster management approach, with responsibilities divided among national, provincial, and municipal governments (Sithole, 2014). The reality is that such an overlap and lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities often promote inefficiencies and confusion. For example, while the DMA tasked municipalities with fundamental disaster management roles, municipalities usually have limited resources and institutional capacity to manage such tasks well (Wentink & Van Niekerk, 2017). This often leads to higher spheres of government, including the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) and Provincial Disaster Management Centres (PDMCs), having to intervene, hence creating a non-proactive but rather reactive approach to disaster management (Van Niekerk, 2014). This fragmentation weakens the efficiency of disaster preparedness and recovery operations.

Furthermore, Sithole (2014) cited resource constraints and municipal capacity issues as significant problems within the disaster management system of South Africa. Municipal disaster management centres set up through DMA and NDMF legal mandates have substantially inadequate funding and understaffing; some centres receive national financial support (Category C), while others depend on their revenues (Category A and Category B). This impacts their effectiveness in implementing disaster preparedness measures and responding quickly during emergencies. Studies have observed that disaster management funds are diverted to less critical but more politically significant issues, decreasing the actual financial allocation for disaster management (Sibanda, 2016; Mamabolo & Sebola, 2021; Mokhele et al., 2024). On the other hand, some challenges facing municipalities in managing disaster risks comprehensively include a need for more technical expertise and training opportunities (Wentink & Van Niekerk, 2017; Munsamy, 2018). The impact of this is that it negatively affects or adversely affects the operational effectiveness of municipal disaster management centres and units. This means that municipal disaster management centres/units do not execute their mandates in preparing and responding to disasters as anticipated (Kunguma et al., 2021).

Effective disaster management requires coordination and cooperation between and among stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community-based organisations (CBOs). In South Africa, these actors need to be integrated. Thus, disaster management functions are perceived as a platform for the selected few. While the NDMF focuses on integrated efforts across spheres of government and sectors, its actual application needs to meet these requirements. High-quality, well-established Community Task Teams outside of weak collaboration frameworks result in fragmented responses in resource utilisation in response to disasters (Kunguma et al., 2021). This is further worsened by the overreliance on reactive measures instead of proactive ones in disaster management; when disasters occur, stakeholders are largely mobilised instead of engaging them in all phases of disaster management, particularly the pre-disaster phase (Sithole, 2014; Mokhele et al., 2024). Each of these challenges calls for a more integrated approach to coordination and collaboration in disaster management and hence requires the involvement of all relevant actors in such processes.

## 3. Methods

Primary and secondary sources gave this research a precise and scientifically sound theoretical and empirical foundation. This investigation, in which the findings were assessed and placed into perspective, was guided by the DMA and the NDMF to support the primary data. In terms of research methodologies, this article used a qualitative method to direct the analysis. The selection of participants was carried out using a non-probabilistic sampling strategy that was further followed by purposive sampling (Berg & Lune, 2012; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The participants were selected due to their inherent knowledge of decentralisation, disaster management, disaster management legislation and the policy framework for its significance.

In other words, a purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with knowledge about the subject matter, research interests, and characteristics. Thus, the selection of the participants in this research, including the development of research interviews, was influenced by a systematic review of the relevant literature. Acknowledging the sample size, Dworkin (2012) argued that qualitative research in the data collection method adopts semi-structured or in-depth interviews if the sample ranges from 5 to 50 or 25 to 30 participants to reach saturation and redundancy (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Similarly, Vasileiou et al. (2018) contended that to manage or control the complexity of qualitative data analysis, researchers should not conduct more than 50 interviews. According to these scholars' suggestions, only 27 participants from the NDMC, three PDMCs, and metropolitan municipalities were interviewed.

## 4. Results

This section presents the qualitative data analysis collected through the participants' interviews. The participants interviewed in this study have been employed in a municipality that performs disaster management functions for more than five years. The main research question was designed to examine how the decentralisation of disaster management in South Africa affects the role of municipalities as implementing centres and the policy implications thereof. The analysis used a few verbatim that corresponded with the emerging themes and indicated where the views were elicited; thus, only some of the verbatim were used in the study, regardless of their concurrence. The section below presents the findings from the interviews.

### *4.1. Feasibility of disaster management decentralisation in South Africa*

When participants were asked about the feasibility of decentralisation in municipalities, they provided different responses. Some participants in the NDMC viewed decentralisation from the perspective that disaster management functions exist in every sphere of government in South Africa. One participant from the NDMC attested that the feasibility of decentralisation is inherently supported by the legislative framework, stating, *"That is a legislative point and foundation of the Disaster Management Act and Intergovernmental Relations Act 13 of 2005 (IGR), which also allocates responsibilities and expectations to other state bodies.' From that point onwards, even the feasibility is natural for me. It is only a matter of checking the feasibility and functionality of the decentralisation exercise."* This highlights the participant's belief that decentralisation is fundamentally sound within existing legislation, with the primary concern being the evaluation of its practical implementation and effectiveness.

Results at the PDMCs reveal significant challenges in the decentralisation process, particularly in coordinating with municipalities. One participant noted, *"As I indicated, as a PDMC, we are struggling with local municipalities regarding issues related to the municipal Disaster Relief Grant and the submission of expenditure reports."* This highlights the difficulty of ensuring consistent and effective disaster management practices at the municipal level, where administrative and financial reporting obligations are not adequately met or complied with. Olaniyan et al. (2020) noted that local governments in Ibadan cannot implement practical disaster risk reduction (DRR) actions despite formal commitments to empower them, reflecting similar challenges in the South African context. The incomplete political, fiscal, and administrative decentralisation limits the effectiveness of decentralisation reforms, making disaster management more challenging at the local level (Olaniyan et al., 2020). Understanding local knowledge and community-specific contexts in disaster management is important, emphasising the necessity for more transparent communication and community engagement in decentralised frameworks, particularly when local disparities hinder coordination and practical implementation (Sukhwani et al., 2019).

On the other hand, results from the MDMCs reflect a more optimistic view of decentralisation. A participant from the MDMC stated, *"In my context, this feasibility is based on disaster management functions in every sphere of government in South Africa. Hence, I would say, for now, decentralisation in South Africa makes sense based on the essential functions of disaster management being delegated from national to*

*provinces and municipalities."* It is evident from this quote that at the municipal level, the benefits of decentralisation are recognised, particularly regarding the precise allocation of disaster management responsibilities across different levels of government, although practical challenges persist. Goyal (2019) noted that disaster policies in India often overlook decentralised institutions as crucial actors, highlighting that those practical issues still need to be addressed due to ineffective local-level structures. Additionally, Otwori and Nyandiko (2024) indicated that the limited decentralisation of disaster risk reduction initiatives poses significant challenges to effective implementation, which resonates with the concerns raised by participants regarding coordination challenges and the effectiveness of local structures in disaster management.

The need for functional decentralisation processes to address localised disaster management challenges is paramount (Otwori & Nyandiko, 2024). The focus on multi-stakeholder, polycentric and multi-sectoral disaster risk governance strategies further reinforces the importance of decentralisation (Koivisto, 2020). Rumbach (2016) noted that although decentralisation has potential, it has yet to significantly improve urban disaster risk management in small cities, indicating that legislative support is insufficient without the practical capacity to implement effective governance.

### *4.2. Uniformity discrepancies*

Regarding the issue of uniformity in the decentralisation of disaster management across government spheres, the participants' results provide a complementary perspective across these spheres. The results of the NDMC reveal that uniformity is a significant concern. One participant highlighted, *"Looking at the compliance assessment we do at the NDMC every quarter, you identify the gaps because the Act clearly states what they are and their PDMCs' responsibilities." Their activities are constrained in other PDMCs because their budgets limit them. For example, the Northern Cape is not well-resourced in terms of budget. So, it has constraints and cannot deliver, as in other provinces such as Western Cape."* This indicates that discrepancies in resource allocation and budgetary constraints across provinces lead to inconsistent implementation of disaster management functions, undermining the uniformity the decentralisation framework aims to achieve. Olaniyan et al. (2020) noted that in Nigeria, uneven fiscal transfers and the lack of proper enforcement mechanisms create resource distribution imbalances across local governments, reflecting similar uniformity discrepancies observed in South African municipalities.

For those in the PDMCs, the results show a pronounced need for uniformity in disaster management practices. One participant remarked, *"It is a lack of uniformity, and every time there is a significant incident, the whole classification declaration process changes. It always changes. There is no uniformity, and there is no one with that concern. When it suits them, it is the premier or MEC. However, again, the Act clearly states that the Premier should declare a disaster in consultation with other MECs."* This highlights a recurring issue where inconsistencies in declaration, classification, and procedural responses during significant incidents lead to operational challenges and inefficiencies, further exacerbating the difficulties of implementing a cohesive disaster management strategy across different regions. Sukhwani et al. (2019) emphasised that institutional barriers, such as unclear organisational arrangements and a top-down approach, can exacerbate discrepancies in disaster response systems, supporting the findings on uneven implementation across provinces.

However, the results from the MDMC show that while there have been efforts to establish uniformity, challenges still need to be addressed in terms of enforcement and adherence. One participant noted, *"Hence, I am talking about uniformity that we have in the MDMC; they [NDMC] will develop the guidelines, but there is no enforcement to say that all the heads of centres should be at the senior management level. We have been fighting to say that maybe, for a start, we should start with the basics and ensure we have disaster management centres that are at the operational level like municipalities such as those in Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, especially the City of Joburg."* This highlights the gap between establishing uniform guidelines and their practical implementation, particularly ensuring that all provinces meet standardised levels of leadership and organisational structure. Goyal (2019) noted that non-compliance with safety regulations and the lack of enforcement powers within disaster

management institutions have contributed to inconsistent outcomes, further complicating efforts to ensure uniformity across provinces and municipalities.

The findings highlight significant challenges in decentralising disaster management in South Africa. The NDMC points to budget constraints affecting capabilities, while PDMCs emphasise practice inconsistencies during major incidents (Kunguma, 2020; Van Niekerk & Du Plessis, 2020). MDMCs recognise efforts to establish uniform guidelines but stress enforcement difficulties, particularly regarding provincial leadership. Van Zyl (2022) argued for more robust enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, Otwori and Nyandiko (2024) noted that inadequate budgets hinder disaster risk reduction, while Ng (2016) highlighted poor citizen engagement as contributing to uneven implementation.

### *4.3. Managing power dynamics and hierarchy structures*

The participants were asked to manage power dynamics and hierarchy structures, eliciting varying responses, with a central point causing severe challenges. Participants noted that entrenched power dynamics often hinder collaborative efforts and decision-making processes, whereas rigid hierarchical systems create bottlenecks and slow response times. The results from the PDMCs show that power dynamics significantly hinder disaster response measures within provinces. One participant remarked, *"I just indicated that power dynamics hamper disaster response measures in the province. It should not happen like that in public service. Being the head of the centre at the Deputy Director level is only based on relationships; now, because the HoD of the Department of Agriculture knows me, he will have an audience."* This highlights how personal relationships and hierarchical positions impact access to resources and decision-making, illustrating the need for more equitable and transparent systems to enhance disaster management effectiveness. Olaniyan et al. (2020) noted similar issues in Ibadan, where entrenched power dynamics hinder local governance effectiveness.

The results of the NDMC revealed that power dynamics across the NDMC, PDMCs, and MDMCs pose a primary constraint to effectively decentralising disaster management to municipalities. One participant from the MDMC noted, *"Power dynamics across the spheres of government will be the primary constraint in decentralising disaster management to municipalities. Budget: distributing sufficient budget across all spheres of government. Increased human capacity: more employees will be needed to execute duties in additional satellite offices."* The results of the NDMC revealed that power dynamics across the NDMC, PDMCs, and MDMCs pose a primary constraint to effectively decentralising disaster management to municipalities. One participant from the MDMC noted, *"Power dynamics across the spheres of government will be the primary constraint in decentralising disaster management to municipalities. Budget: distributing sufficient budget across all spheres of government. Increased human capacity: more employees will be needed to execute duties in additional satellite offices."*

This underscores the necessity of managing power imbalances alongside equitable budget distribution and increased staff for effective decentralised disaster management (Goyal, 2019). These findings concur with Munzhedzi (2021) that managing power dynamics and hierarchical structures presents a significant challenge to decentralising disaster management across municipalities. However, participants' varied responses highlight that entrenched power imbalances and rigid hierarchies can impede effective collaboration and decision-making (Van Niekerk& Du Plessis, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). The results of the PDMCs emphasise how personal relationships and hierarchical positioning impact resource allocation and response efficiency. At the same time, the findings of the NDMC stress that these power dynamics and budgetary and staffing issues are critical constraints in the decentralisation process.

### *4.4. Placement of Disaster Management Centre in Municipalities*

Regarding the impact of the disaster management centre function's placement in municipalities, the participants' responses concurred that the primary thrust of integrating these functions into

municipal structures is intended to enhance local responsiveness and coordination during disasters. However, such placement's impact hampers disaster management centres' effectiveness. The results of the PDMC indicated that the placement of disaster management functions within municipal structures significantly impacts the effectiveness of such activities. One participant pointed out, *"The issue of placement and its impact of making our activities challenging to implement, the issue of making decisions is complicated because the disaster management centre is a section reporting to a division, which is business operations."* This illustrates how the organisational placement of disaster management centres can complicate decision-making processes and hinder the effective implementation of disaster response activities, particularly when these centres are embedded within broader business operations divisions (Ng, 2016).

Results from NDMC revealed that improper placement of disaster management functions significantly hampers disaster practitioners' daily operations. One participant elaborated, *"The wrong placement just makes our daily disaster management activities as disaster practitioners difficult because you will not have the proper budget, will not have the right personnel with high disaster management expertise, or credentials would come and go because they would see that no disaster management practises are happening here. It is just a matter of maintaining the status quo."* This indicates how inadequate placement can lead to insufficient funding, a lack of specialised personnel, and a tendency to maintain existing, ineffective practices, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of disaster management efforts (Otwori & Nyandiko, 2024). MDMC results show that the placement of disaster management functions in municipalities can significantly affect their efficacy. This was articulated by one participant who stated, *"It does have an impact on the placement of disaster management function in any local or district municipality because if you are placed in the wrong place, then your voice would not be heard, and now and then, you would have to go through red tape for your voice to be heard, and therefore the people that actually on top might not even understand what you are meant to do in the local or district municipality."*

This highlights that improper placement can lead to difficulties in communication and decision-making and a lack of understanding of the disaster management role among higher-level officials, which can hinder effective disaster response and management at the local level (Koivisto, 2020). Overall, the improper placement of disaster management roles within municipal structures in Nigeria complicates coordination and decision-making, underscoring the critical need for appropriate disaster management functions in municipalities for effective response (Olaniyan et al., 2020). Institutional barriers, such as improper organisational placement, often lead to inefficient disaster response, reinforcing the need for proper alignment within local structures to ensure smoother communication and resource flow (Sukhwani et al., 2019). Ultimately, inadequate engagement of local communities and leaders in disaster planning and mitigation has resulted in inefficiencies in disaster response and preparedness (Goyal, 2019).

### *4.5. Disaster management centres and sector department collaboration*

When asked about the disaster management centres and sector department collaboration, the participants highlighted the critical role that inter-agency cooperation should play in effective disaster management. One participant from the PDMCs asserted, *"Still, in terms of risk assessment, our project development in terms of prevention, awareness, campaign, and preparedness designation of early warning systems, I think the decentralisation is working because, for instance, if there are issues of risk, just meant is we are all away that our municipalities and provinces are not the same."* This statement highlights that decentralisation has facilitated a more nuanced approach to risk assessment and project development by acknowledging the diverse needs and conditions across municipalities and provinces. This aligns with Rumbach (2016), who discussed how decentralisation can enhance responsiveness by bringing decision-making closer to local communities and addressing their risks. However, similar to Nyandiko (2020) and Koivisto (2020), challenges with coordination and communication among sectors persist, leading to delays in effective policy implementation. The results of the NDMCs showed that effective collaboration with sector departments significantly enhances disaster management efforts. One participant stated, *"We have very sound institutional arrangements with our sector departments.*

*We usually go to disaster management incidents because we know about them. Especially when drawing up risk reduction and preparedness plans; that is where you build that relationship."*

This reflects institutional solid ties, essential for successful disaster management, as highlighted by Ocal (2019), who observed that national-level collaboration and stakeholder participation are critical for effective disaster planning and education. Similarly, Fujita and Shaw (2019) emphasised the importance of institutional cooperation in flood risk reduction, supporting findings from South Africa that well-established networks between disaster management centres and sector departments facilitate better planning, response, and collaboration. The MDMC results showed that structured collaboration between disaster management centres enhances effectiveness. One participant remarked, *"Collaboration amongst the disaster management centres occurs through the offices of different Head of Centres and Head of Centre Forums, which meet monthly. Many disaster management activities, such as public awareness, have been successfully conducted by municipalities in collaboration with the Provincial Disaster Management Centre and other relevant stakeholders within the municipalities."* This structured approach resonates with Olaniyan et al. (2020), who noted that in Ibadan, grassroots collaboration and community-led initiatives often complement formal disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies, reflecting the importance of both institutional and community involvement.

Furthermore, Rico (2019) supported this by highlighting that knowledge sharing between local institutions, such as schools and the community, plays a vital role in building preparedness, which echoes the value of the public awareness campaigns mentioned by the MDMC participants. These findings demonstrate that effective collaboration between disaster management centres and sector departments is essential for optimising disaster management practices. However, as Cvetkovic and Martinović (2020) point out, innovative solutions in inter-sectoral collaboration, particularly in communication and civil protection, remain untapped, which could further enhance disaster response efforts. Moreover, Otwori and Nyandiko (2024) stressed that integrating disaster risk reduction strategies across multiple sectors, such as planning, finance, and agriculture, is necessary for ensuring sustainable resource access—another aspect underscored by participants who noted the importance of inter-agency cooperation for effective disaster planning and management.

Responses regarding disaster management centres and sector department collaboration emphasise the importance of inter-agency cooperation in effective disaster management. The participants from the PDMCs highlighted that decentralisation has improved the ability of municipalities to address diverse risks and develop targeted prevention and preparedness strategies by recognising the varied needs of different municipalities and provinces. This localised approach has enhanced overall effectiveness (Duze & Reddy, 2020; Cabane, 2023). The results of the NDMC emphasised that robust institutional arrangements and established relationships with sector departments are crucial for effective disaster response and planning because they facilitate the development of comprehensive risk reduction and preparedness plans. Furthermore, the MDMC results demonstrated that structured collaboration through regular forums and meetings has led to successful disaster management activities, such as public awareness campaigns, illustrating the significant benefits of coordinated efforts across various levels of disaster management centres, as was the case during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings resonate with Kunguma et al. (2021) and Mokhele et al. (2024) that effective collaboration and well-established communication channels are essential for optimising disaster management practices and improving readiness across different levels of government and sectors.

## 5. Discussion

Results from this study depict the complex interplay between legislative frameworks and practical challenges in disaster management implementation in South African municipalities. This, of course, relates to the receptiveness at the municipality level to their roles within an integrated disaster management system, of which the engagement of key stakeholders by local government officials and community leaders is part. This highlights the critical role of local government officials in implementing the will of the legislature and engaging communities in critical principles of disaster

management (Baudoin et al., 2017). Knowledge of the Disaster Management Act (DMA) and the Intergovernmental Relations Act regarding these relationships is essential for local implementation of these frameworks. Another vital function community leaders perform is reinforcing municipalities' disaster management. Community leaders interface with municipalities and communities to ensure that local needs and vulnerabilities are acknowledged in disaster planning and response efforts (Zamisa & Mutereko, 2019). This cooperation is vital for municipalities to enhance their responsiveness to disasters by ensuring their strategies meet the community's expectations and requirements.

Although the DMA has legislative support, just like the Intergovernmental Relations Act, practical problems still lie regarding coordination and financial reporting at the municipal level (Mamabolo & Sebola, 2021). Although there is a semblance of a desire to create standard uniformity in practices related to disaster management, the decentralisation process has resulted in differences in significant resources and procedure practices between different municipalities. This study revealed that budgetary issues limit the practical implementation of disaster management functions across participating cities, consistent with the literature by Olaniyan et al. (2020) on fiscal imbalances in local governance. Creating regulatory resource benchmarks may further stabilise municipalities in terms of resource input into eventuated equal disaster management capabilities. Inter-municipality agreements on resource sharing can be another strategy for balancing resource availability across municipalities and enabling support for one another during the disaster. Targeted financial models, such as a tiered support system in which funding is proportional to different types of risk, will ensure funding to areas where it is most needed (Üster & Dalal, 2017). In this way, adequate funding can be increased in higher-risk areas while ensuring that all municipalities receive satisfactory resources for disaster preparedness.

On the other hand, public-private partnerships could also be sought to finance disaster management plans that require resources and technical skills from the private sector to increase municipal capacity for disaster response. Entrenched power dynamics and rigid hierarchical structures are significant barriers to collaboration and decision-making. Resource distribution also goes down the line of personal relationships and hierarchical positioning, again raising the issue of the need to address the balance of power. Munzhedzi (2021) stated that if appropriately handled, power dynamics allow for an equal distribution of resources and responsibilities, which is required to optimise disaster management outcomes. Transparencies in implementing systems and collaboration across stakeholders are critical to realising this development and overcoming challenges (Van Niekerk & Du Plessis, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). Where disaster management centres fall in municipal structures determines how efficiently they operate. Placing such a unit at a broader business operation division level complicates decision-making. This slows down response activities, as stated by the respondents. This is related to Koivisto (2020), who argued that the organisational placement of disaster management roles is necessary for effective communication and the flow of resources. Disaster management, therefore, needs to be strategically positioned within municipal frameworks to garner maximum prominence and visibility and influence better coordination during disasters.

In addition, cooperation with disaster management centres and departments in the respective sectors should be practical for optimising optimal disaster management practices. Participants, for instance, explained that cooperation among agencies enabled nuanced risk assessments and targeted prevention strategies that met local needs more precisely. However, it also creates persistent policy implementation delays because of challenges in coordination and communication among sectors. Improvement in coordination could be attained if municipalities adopted specific technological tools, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), to track resources to identify allocation and actual impacts in real time (Kurwakumire et al., 2019). Moreover, mobile-based communication platforms facilitate information-sharing and decision-making among stakeholders involved in disaster cases (Handayani et al., 2023). Although the legislative framework supports decentralisation, this practice in coordination, power dynamics, resource allocation and organisational placement remains a significant test for efficient disaster management. This will require a multi-faceted approach that includes community involvement and equitable distribution of resources through closer cooperation among stakeholders. Municipalities should have robust mechanisms to comply with standard disaster management guidelines and design means of equitably distributing resources. Reforms must also be begun towards more transparent and equal disaster management framework systems.

Additionally, all municipalities should be supported in developing a transparent and efficient disaster management system with clearly articulated strategies and finance models that achieve specific outcomes and embrace technological innovations.

## 6. Long-Term Strategies for Sustaining Decentralisation Efforts

Decentralisation, if effective at all in disaster management, must be multi-faceted. Tselios and Tompkins (2017) emphasise that the devolution of authority to local self-governments may minimise the consequences of natural hazards. However, persistent challenges exist in developing further local capacity and improving coordination. Formal resource benchmarks in keeping with municipalities should be established as a guideline for the tools and infrastructure municipalities require to respond effectively. This has been an essential area of concern because, as Rumbach (2016) noted, most smaller municipalities need more adequate resources. Learning to share resources between municipalities can help build trust and hasten the process of aid when needed urgently. Disaster management units should be created in each municipality. The case of South Korea highlights how a unified management system helped coordinate efforts between different levels of governance. This will involve investment in regular capacity-building programmes, enabling local officials to understand better and manage disaster risks. Putra and Matsuyuki (2019) confirmed that ongoing training is necessary to counter the challenges related to funding shortages and lack of expertise.

Municipal disaster units should also be regularly appraised to identify performance gaps and congruence with national policies. Garschagen (2016) called for constant evaluations when contesting governance agendas (Bae et al., 2015). Finally, integrating technological equipment in disaster management, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), in resource tracking and communication platforms through mobile devices for improved coordination might significantly enhance the efficiency of disaster management (Hermansson, 2019). With the assistance of such technologies, timely decision-making during disasters can be achieved. To summarise, all requirements for decentralisation at all levels ensure that clear indications of resource availability are flashed, coordination is enhanced, proper structures and institutions in those structures are trained, and new technologies and methodologies are adopted to address emerging risks and vulnerabilities.

## 7. Conclusions

Underpinned by the Disaster Management Act (DMA) and supported by the National Disaster Management Framework (NDMF), decentralisation of disaster management in South Africa ensures that an intricate dance between legislative intent and systemic weakness, on the one hand, and practical challenges dampen any hope for effective municipal disaster responses. While the DMA and NDMF are intended to structure and support disaster management at different governmental levels, the effectiveness of their intent is compromised by a significant understanding and implementation gap existing at the municipal level. Several participants from MDMCs and PDMCs needed to gain developed knowledge of such legislative tools; thus, there is an urgent need for education and training. This gap affects how municipalities effectively implement disaster management strategies, highlighting the need for dedicated capacity-building programmes to enhance local disaster management capacity. Another study finding is that decentralised disaster management usually results in reactive rather than proactive responses due to practical realities. The DMA and the NDMF have set out an appropriate framework, but conflicts and the need for alignment with national and provincial policies remain essential challenges municipalities face.

This misalignment, along with the centralisation of crucial disaster management functions, undermines the effectiveness of municipal contributions and exposes a pivotal barrier to effective decentralisation. It is such that political commitment needs to be improved at higher levels of government, leaving municipalities with little resourcing and thus side-lined in disaster risk reduction efforts. This analysis also reveals profound discontinuities and fragmentation in disaster management practices in various government spheres. These differences in the understanding and application

of disaster management policies at the municipal level translate into ineffective local risk reduction strategies, which constitute a fundamental weakness of the disaster management system in South Africa. Fragments and inconsistent policy application work to decrease the overall effectiveness of disaster response mechanisms; thus, unity and cohesion of the disaster management framework are necessary.

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