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### **Plight of the deaf takes center stage during weather awareness engagement**

Members of the deaf community in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, on Friday 23 February 2024, lamented how Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) services tended to be designed with only able-bodied persons in mind, thereby excluding vulnerable groups.

They spoke out at a local hall during a South African Weather Service (SAWS) community outreach activity aimed at empowering residents with crucial information that could help save lives, livelihoods and property from the effects of severe weather events. The event shone a spotlight on the plight of differently-abled persons and the elderly, among other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Hammanskraal and neighbouring villages are among areas within the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality that are prone to flooding following instances of heavy rainfall. This is because parts of the town and the surrounding settlements are built on a flood plain.

In recent times, residents of Ramotse, Marokolong, Majaneng, Mandela, Lephengville, Suurman, Dilopye, Sekampaneng, Tamboville, Unit 7 in Temba, Carousel View, Ga-Moeka and Ga-Motle in Moretele, among other places, have had to navigate severely flooded streets and backyards.

Speaking through a sign language interpreter, a pupil from the local Dominican School for the Deaf (DSD) said they struggled to access services rendered by emergency and disaster management authorities in times of fire and weather-related distress.

“As a deaf person, how do I effectively use the contact details you have provided to access the crucial services that you render,” another learner asked a city emergency services representative, who undertook to look into such complaints.

Meanwhile, a 71-year-old woman from Stinkwater, Ms Georgina Ntsweng, said she gathered invaluable information during the event, adding that she would use it to improve her resilience against adverse weather impacts similar to one her community experienced in 2020.

“I was going about my business at home when I heard what sounded like my window panes were being pelted with stones. Upon closer inspection, it turned out that there was hail the size of a tennis ball. Our houses suffered untold damage that year,” Ms Ntsweng said.

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Addressing the event earlier, SAWS Chief Executive Officer, Mr Ishaam Abader, said his office had a mammoth task of informing public, private and personal decision-making regarding health, agriculture and food security, aviation, marine transport, water resources, DRR, and climate change adaptation.

Mr Abader echoed the cautions of international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and its agency, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), telling guests that the entire African continent was in climate change-induced danger and urgently needed the highest rates of protection.

While Africa accounted for 35% of weather, climate, and water-related deaths between 1970 and 2021, he said, 60% of the continent's population still did not have access to early warning systems and that this was the lowest rate of any region in the world.

"The UN warns that delaying the implementation of early warning systems – the most basic tools for saving lives and securing livelihood – costs lives. They caution that delayed action means more deadly extreme weather events, more deaths, more destruction, and less ability to recover," Mr Abader explained.

"And they are not being alarmist when they say, unless drastic steps are taken, those like us here in Africa, who are on the front line of the climate crisis, will continue to pay the highest price."

He said the SAWS shouldered the responsibility of putting in place measures that ought to give effect to the UN's Early Warnings for All initiative, in terms of which nations of the world are called upon to see to it that everyone on earth is protected from hazardous weather, water, or climate events through life-saving early warning systems.

The organisation would use its network of reliable observational infrastructure and tools such as the meteorological Radio Detection and Ranging (RADAR) systems, automatic weather stations, rainfall stations, automatic rainfall stations, upper-air sounding stations, lightning detection sensors, solar radiation stations and satellite data to achieve this, Mr Abader said.

During the event, residents also heard from intermediaries such as the Gauteng Provincial Disaster Management Centre; Expanded Public Works Programme wing, Working On Fire; and not-for-profit humanitarian organisation, South African Red Cross Society.

In addition, pupils from neighbouring schools, other than the DSD, were taken through a host of career prospects available in atmospheric sciences and the bursary opportunities that the SAWS provides for learners who wish to pursue meteorology as a profession.

The event was funded by the Weather and Climate Information Services (WISER) programme. WISER seeks to generate novel weather information and ensure that this is communicated and used for disaster risk reduction decision-making.

It is led by the SAWS's British counterpart, the UK Met Office, commissioned by the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and supported by UK aid.

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