

Reimagining Social Work Responses to Disaster-Induced Housing Loss: Harnessing Ubudlelane

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EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 20 January 2025

Revised: 16 April 2026

Accepted: 18 April 2026

Published: 29 April 2026

Copyright:

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Published by [ERRCD Forum](#).

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DOI: [10.38140/ijrcs-2026.vol8.1.03](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2026.vol8.1.03)

Abstract: Disasters, including heavy rainfall and flooding, frequently result in devastating consequences for disadvantaged communities, particularly through the loss of housing as a critical form of shelter. Notably, the role of social workers in disaster response often remains largely unrecognised; however, it is fundamentally central to addressing the challenges faced by victims, grounded in the profession's foundational pillars of support, empowerment, and resilience-building. This conceptual paper examines how social workers could apply the philosophy of ubudlelane to enhance responses and interventions during disaster crises. In the aftermath of disasters, ubudlelane has the potential to situate social work interventions within human-centred responses that bolster disaster preparedness by reinforcing existing community networks and enhancing local capacities to confront future crises. The paper contextualises this perspective through the Ubudlelane-disaster response framework, which enables social workers not only to address immediate material and emotional needs but also to cultivate long-term social cohesion and sustainable recovery. Furthermore, the paper highlights practical strategies such as facilitating community healing circles, organising collective resource mobilisation initiatives, and collaborating with local leadership structures to co-develop culturally responsive disaster interventions. Ultimately, the application of the ubudlelane philosophy in disaster social work contributes to Afrocentric, context-specific, and community-driven approaches that

empower disadvantaged communities to rebuild not only their homes but also the social fabric essential for resilience and well-being.

Keywords: Ubudlelane, disasters, social work, housing loss, community practice, community resilience, collective recovery, vulnerability.

1. Introduction

Social work is increasingly recognising its critical role in responding to the diverse and complex forms of disasters that affect individuals, families, and communities, with its central concern rooted in safeguarding human safety, dignity, and overall well-being (Matlakala, Makhubele & Nyahunda, 2022; Ewenson, Bruinsma, Crestani, Gearing, Rogers, & Swain et al., 2025). Despite this recognition, social work has frequently remained underacknowledged within the broader disaster management sector, as its contributions are often more closely associated with interventions in domains such as family welfare, child protection, and the provision of psychosocial support to individuals and groups (Ewenson et al., 2025). There appears to be limited focus on disaster responsiveness when communities encounter such events; however, the devastating impacts of disasters, whether natural or human-induced, increasingly expose individuals to heightened vulnerabilities, placing lives, livelihoods, and community stability at significant risk. These contemporary realities compel social work to reorient its practice beyond its conventional scope, adopting a more holistic perspective that attends to the multifaceted personal, social, cultural, and structural forces that shape human vulnerability, particularly in the face of disasters.

How to cite this article:

Xweso, M., Gwam, Z., & Mtengwane, G. (2026). Reimagining social work responses to disaster-induced housing loss: Harnessing ubudlelane. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Rural and Community Studies*, 8(1), a03. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2026.vol8.1.03>

Such a reorientation also highlights the urgent necessity of grounding social work practice within African philosophies that meaningfully centre humanity in disaster preparedness and response. Disaster preparedness is of particular importance, as it entails the development and implementation of interventions designed to mitigate disaster risks, including the formulation of responsive policies and plans, the provision of training and education, and the systematic sharing of knowledge and information to ensure that both individuals and communities are adequately equipped should a disaster occur (Alston, Hazeleger & Hargreaves, 2019). Certainly, when communities are confronted with natural disasters, indigenous communal strategies of resilience and disaster reduction often exist, many of which are embedded in the ethos of ubuntu, where individuals extend themselves towards others in acts of solidarity and care (Lunga, Sithole, Musarurwa, Kombate & Marovha, 2025). Lunga et al. (2025) argue that in Southern Africa, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) has long been shaped by global technocratic frameworks that often marginalise or sideline indigenous knowledge systems. Yet, as the frequency and intensity of climate-related hazards escalate, the limitations of infrastructure-centric approaches have become increasingly evident, underscoring the need for culturally grounded resilience strategies that affirm local knowledge and practices (Lunga et al., 2025).

Considering this, the present paper draws on the philosophy of Ubudlelane, aiming to provide culturally embedded perspectives through which social work with communities can enhance disaster interventions rooted in reciprocal care, communality, solidarity, and shared humanity (Xweso, Gwam & Muleya, 2025). Ubudlelane is introduced as a guiding principle that emphasises the reciprocal sharing of resources and collective responsibility (Xweso & Gwam, 2024), offering values closely aligned with the humanism of Ubuntu. These values are critical for reimagining disaster social work practice (Lunga et al., 2025). Therefore, the paper proposes a conceptual framework – the Ubudlelane-Disaster Framework for Social Workers – which presents an alternative to Western-dominated approaches to disaster reduction. It aims to orient social work practice towards humanity-driven interventions that strengthen resilience and communality in the face of disasters. This perspective acknowledges that resilience emerges not solely from institutional capacity but equally from the moral, cultural, and social fabric of the communities where Ubudlelane is lived and practised.

The following scenario, drawn from the severe flooding in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, illustrates the lived consequences of gaps in disaster management, particularly the disjuncture between formal systems and community-based relational coping mechanisms. This context directly informs the development of this paper and its contribution towards more contextually grounded and relationally responsive disaster risk reduction approaches.

1.1. Flood events in Mthatha, Eastern Cape: Contextualising a disaster-induced challenge

Photo 1, taken in June 2025, illustrates the severe flooding that affected villages in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, resulting in the destruction of numerous homes. The disaster claimed the lives of over 102 individuals and left countless families traumatised (Eastern Cape Provincial Government, 2025). The event caused profound psychosocial distress, as residents were confronted with injuries and fatalities among family members and neighbours, underscoring the devastating human and material impact of the floods.



Photo 1: Some villages in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, submerged by floodwaters (Times Live, 2025)

Beyond immediate material loss, the disaster revealed underlying structural inequalities, including inadequate housing, insufficient infrastructure, and limited access to support systems. This scenario offers a compelling context for this narrative, situating it within a real-world event that elucidates the multifaceted impacts of disaster on communities.

2. Problematising International Disaster Risk Management Frameworks

Global disaster risk management frameworks since the 1990s have been primarily shaped by technocratic and scientifically driven paradigms, which privilege risk quantification, technological interventions such as early warning systems and predictive modelling, institutional standardisation, and globally measurable targets, often under the coordination of multilateral bodies such as the United Nations (UNESCO, 2022; Kasimbazi, 2024). While these frameworks have undeniably advanced disaster governance, their limitations lie not in their scientific rigour, but in their epistemological narrowness and insufficient contextual embeddedness, particularly within African settings.

The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World (1994), adopted during the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, marked a critical shift from reactive disaster response to proactive prevention, preparedness, and mitigation (Enia, 2020). It aligned disaster risk reduction with sustainable development, incorporating principles such as vulnerability reduction, environmental protection, and community participation. However, its engagement with local and indigenous knowledge remained largely instrumental rather than relational, treating such knowledge as supplementary rather than constitutive of disaster resilience. From an *ubudlelane* perspective, this reflects a critical omission: the absence of a relational ontology that situates disaster risk within interconnected social, cultural, and communal ties, rather than as discrete risk variables. Consequently, although the framework acknowledges "community participation", it does not fully engage with the lived, reciprocal, and interdependent relationships that sustain resilience in African communities.

The Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015) further operationalised disaster risk reduction through measurable indicators and institutional strengthening. Its emphasis on community participation, knowledge dissemination, and cultural diversity suggests a progressive shift.

However, implementation reveals a persistent dominance of top-down, state-centric approaches, particularly in contexts such as South Africa, where structural inequalities, poverty, and informality shape vulnerability (Nemakonde & Van Niekerk, 2023; Nobambela & Yekani, 2025). While the Hyogo Framework recognises indigenous knowledge, it does not sufficiently disrupt the hierarchy between "expert" knowledge and community-based epistemologies. In relation to *ubudlelane*, what is missing is a recognition of community agency as relationally constituted, where knowledge is not merely possessed but co-produced through social bonds, shared histories, and collective responsibility. This absence results in interventions that overlook how communities interpret and respond to environmental signals through embedded cultural practices.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) expands its scope to encompass an all-hazards, all-of-society approach, thereby integrating disaster risk reduction with global agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals. It explicitly acknowledges the significance of indigenous and local knowledge systems while promoting inclusive, multi-stakeholder engagement. Nevertheless, its continued reliance on technocratic indicators, formal governance systems, and innovation-driven solutions reveals an enduring epistemic imbalance. In practice, particularly within African contexts, this translates into partial inclusion rather than epistemic integration, whereby indigenous knowledge is recognised but not structurally central to decision-making processes. From an *ubudlelane* standpoint, the limitation is found in the failure to prioritise relational ethics, mutual care, and collective interdependence as foundational to resilience-building, rather than relegating them to peripheral considerations. The recurrent impacts of disasters, such as the 2022 KwaZulu-Natal floods and the 2024 Mthatha floods, illustrate how globally derived models inadequately engage with local relational systems that shape vulnerability and recovery.

UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy (2022–2029) represents a more progressive attempt to bridge this divide by advocating for the integration of scientific and indigenous knowledge systems. It acknowledges the importance of local ecological knowledge and highlights barriers such as policy biases that favour Western scientific paradigms (UNESCO, 2022). While this signals a significant shift, the integration remains largely framed within a complementary logic rather than a transformative one. In contrast, *ubudlelane* calls for a re-centring of relational knowledge systems, where resilience is understood as emerging from networks of care, solidarity, and shared responsibility embedded within communities.

Overall, while international disaster risk management frameworks have contributed significantly to global awareness, institutional development, and technical capacity, their limitations are most evident in insufficient localisation, over-reliance on universalised scientific paradigms, and marginal engagement with relational worldviews. The critique advanced here is therefore not a rejection of Western methodologies but rather a call for their epistemological expansion and contextual grounding. In particular, *ubudlelane* highlights what is missing: a relationally grounded understanding of risk, vulnerability, and resilience that centres human interconnectedness, collective agency, and culturally embedded practices. Without this, disaster risk reduction efforts risk remaining technically robust yet socially disconnected, especially in contexts such as South Africa, where vulnerability is deeply relational and historically constituted.

3. Methodological Framework and Analytical Approach

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive paradigm grounded in African relational epistemologies, drawing on disaster studies to interrogate how disaster experiences in Southern African communities may be culturally mediated through the work of social workers engaging with these communities. Anchored in an interpretivist perspective that posits reality as socially constructed and shaped by lived experiences (Fouche et al., 2021), the study conceptualises *Ubudlelane* not merely as a normative philosophy but as an evolving social practice that underpins communal resilience. Interpretations of *Ubudlelane* are relatively novel; as Xweso et al. (2025)

observe, communality and the sharing of resources constitute a central dimension of resilience in times of crisis. This resonates with Mugumbate and Chereni's (2020) reflections on *ubuntu*, wherein rituals and political discourses illuminate how communities collectively negotiate meaning during periods of adversity.

The analysis is constructed through engagement with the existing body of literature, alongside African philosophical texts. This is further enriched by the authors' experiential insights into community responses to disasters, such as instances of housing loss, where the enactment of *Ubudlelane* manifests tangibly in communal solidarity and mutual support. The article also draws on the principles of relational ethics (McCubbin & Moniz, 2014), emphasising reciprocity, contextual sensitivity, and epistemic justice. In doing so, it responds to calls for scholarship that interweaves *Ubudlelane* with Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) to generate more culturally attuned interpretations of disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM), particularly within the context of social work. Ultimately, this approach challenges dominant Eurocentric strategies of disaster response by reconceptualising resilience as an ethical and collective practice rooted in African epistemologies and ways of being.

4. Foregrounding *Ubudlelane* within Disaster Response

At the outset, it is essential to foreground the concept of *ubudlelane*, clarifying its meaning and exploring how it may be situated within disaster-centred responses in social work – a connection that will be examined in greater depth in the subsequent sections of this paper. As articulated by Xweso and Gwam (2024), *ubudlelane* is an African philosophy that embodies the principle of sharing. This sharing extends beyond material resources to encompass love, care, and mutual support within human relationships, grounded in the practical expression of "*ukuqhekezelana ngesonka*" (breaking bread) with others in the community. Xweso and Gwam (2024) initially conceptualised *ubudlelane* within the context of poverty alleviation, emphasising that acts of sharing with others manifest *ubuntu* – a value grounded in humanity and reciprocity, encapsulated in the notion that "a person is a person through others" (Mabvurira, 2022). In this *framework*, *ubudlelane* becomes the active practice of sharing, ensuring that *ubuntu* is realised through tangible actions of solidarity and care (Xweso & Gwam, 2024).

Within their conceptualisation, Xweso and Gwam (2024) outline key principles of *ubudlelane*, including sharing and reciprocity, togetherness, collaboration, empathy, and understanding. These principles resonate strongly with the values of social work, particularly in contexts where practitioners are called to support vulnerable populations. When disasters result in the loss of homes and livelihoods, these principles become highly relevant in guiding responses. As Matlakatla *et al.* (2022) note, disaster-affected communities require multifaceted support, and social workers play a crucial role in ensuring that these needs are addressed. Viewing such interventions through the lens of *ubudlelane* underscores the principle of collaboration, suggesting that effective disaster response is not the responsibility of one actor alone, but rather a collective effort led by communities and supported by multiple stakeholders. In this sense, *ubudlelane* provides a philosophical and practical foundation for socially responsive and culturally grounded interventions in disaster contexts. Aligned with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (United Nations (UN), 2015), *ubudlelane* emphasises the importance of fostering resilience in the face of disasters that threaten human settlements and livelihoods. Disasters, whether natural or human-induced, exacerbate housing vulnerability and disrupt social cohesion, leaving communities in need of sustainable recovery strategies. The philosophy of *ubudlelane*, grounded in sharing and caring, offers a culturally embedded approach to collective support during such crises. Additionally, *ubudlelane* positions social work practice within a participatory-oriented form of disaster response that contributes to safer, more resilient, and inclusive communities.

In situating *ubudlelane* within the context of social work practice, we draw on the initial conceptualisation by Xweso and Gwam (2024), which posits that *ubudlelane* is applicable across micro, mezzo, macro, and institutional levels of intervention. In the African language Xhosa, we refer to these as *Inqanaba loBuntu* (micro level), *Inqanaba leQela* (mezzo level), and *Inqanaba leNgingqi* (macro level). These levels underscore that, in addressing community challenges, such as disaster-induced housing loss, social workers should strategically coordinate their interventions across all levels.

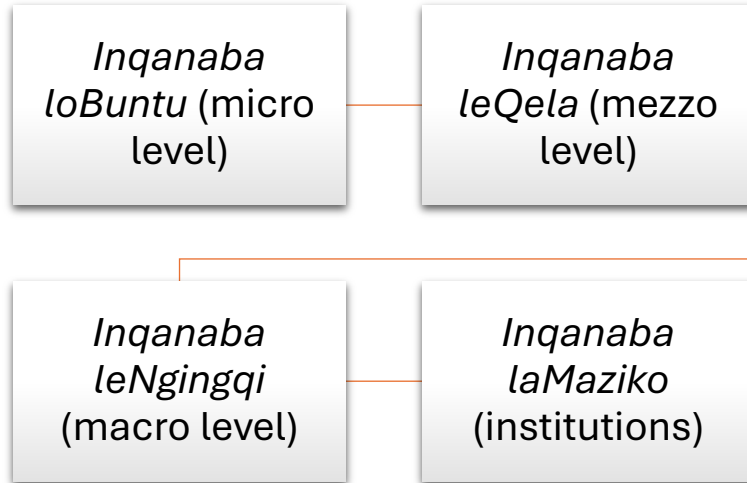


Figure 1. Levels of Ubudlelane at which interventions can be enacted.
Adapted from Xweso and Gwam (2024).

In the context of disaster response, the following sections illustrate how each level can be operationalised to enhance participatory and culturally grounded social work practice. The micro, mezzo, macro, and institutional levels of intervention are integral to social work as they provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the multifaceted needs of individuals and communities (Nicholas, Rautenbach & Maistry, 2010). According to Karim (2023), these levels enable social workers to implement interventions that are not only responsive to immediate concerns but also proactive in fostering systemic change. Engaging at each level allows social workers to ensure that their interventions are holistic, culturally relevant, and sustainable, thereby enhancing the resilience of communities in the face of disasters. We will clarify the meaning of each level as outlined below, specifically aligning them with the context of the *ubudlelane* disaster response.

- At the **micro level (Inqanaba loBuntu)**, *ubudlelane* emphasises the importance of the individual "self," recognising that disaster-responsive practice begins with social workers and community members internalising and embodying the principles of compassionate sharing and care. By practising *ubudlelane* in their daily lives, individuals cultivate selflessness and empathy, enabling them to extend meaningful support to those directly affected by disasters. This aligns with the broader philosophy of *ubuntu*, which underscores the interdependence of humanity and the obligation to care for one another.
- At the **mezzo level (Inqanaba leQela)**, *ubudlelane* extends to families, groups, and communities, fostering the collective initiatives crucial in the aftermath of disasters. Here, the philosophy facilitates the weaving of social bonds and encourages collective coping strategies such as mutual aid, shared resources, and communal spaces for psychosocial and spiritual healing. These practices strengthen social cohesion and create safety nets for groups facing dislocation and trauma caused by disaster-induced housing loss.
- At the **macro level (Inqanaba leNgingqi)**, *ubudlelane* underpins the development of broader community structures that dismantle barriers of exclusion and reduce isolation. In the context

of disaster response, this means identifying opportunities for coordinated community mobilisation, resource pooling, and solidarity networks that can mitigate vulnerabilities. Such community-wide responses not only address immediate disaster needs but also enhance long-term resilience by promoting inclusivity and collective preparedness for future crises.

- At the **institutional level**, ubudlelane offers a framework through which organisations, government bodies, and civil society can address systemic inequalities that disasters often exacerbate. It encourages institutions to embrace bottom-up approaches guided by collaboration, reciprocity, and community ownership. In practical terms, this translates into disaster interventions that are participatory, culturally grounded, and responsive to the lived realities of disadvantaged populations. By aligning institutional responses with ubudlelane, social work practice contributes to a more compassionate and equitable system of disaster management that empowers affected communities.

The levels of ubudlelane intervention serve as a guiding instrument in executing the ubudlelane disaster response framework, which we outline below. These levels are discernible across each phase of the framework, reflecting a decolonised approach to disaster response as applied by social workers. In the subsequent discussion, we will elucidate the framework in detail, demonstrating how it operationalises indigenous values of ubudlelane in shaping responsive and contextually grounded interventions.

5. Ubudlelane Disaster Response for Community-Grouped Social Work

Kaniasty (2020) argues that the complexity of disaster experiences requires examination from multiple levels, including environmental, psychological, social, political, and cultural dimensions. We agree with this viewpoint and further assert that incorporating cultural and spiritual dimensions is essential. Therefore, social workers should adopt these elements and align their interventions with the framework presented in Figure 2 below.

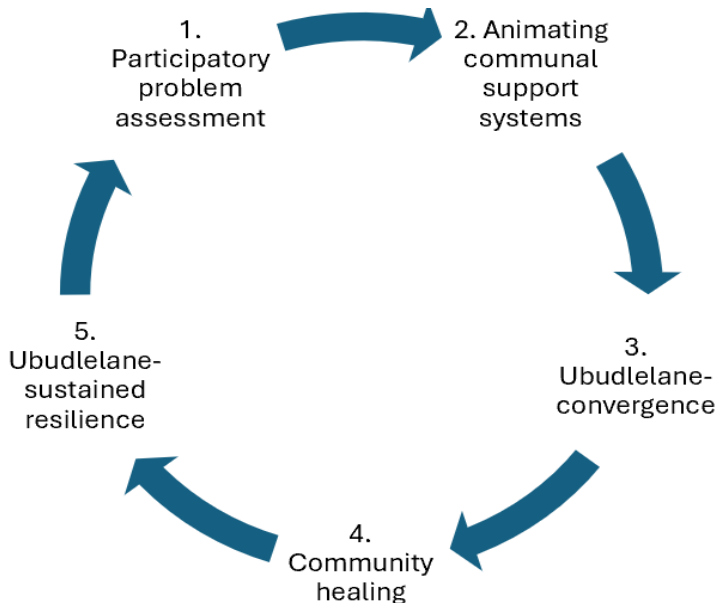


Figure 2: Ubudlelane-disaster response framework

The steps shown in Figure 2 outline the recommended approach for social workers engaging with communities impacted by disasters. Each step specifies particular actions and considerations that social workers should follow, as detailed below.

5.1 Step 1: Participatory problem assessment

The first phase of the Ubudlelane disaster response framework is participatory problem assessment. In many Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) approaches, the initial response often prioritises technical mitigation measures (Ward et al., 2020; Lunga et al., 2025). However, Ubudlelane emphasises a participatory assessment that is rooted in collaboration among social workers, community members, and first responders. This approach challenges the traditional view of disaster situations as domains reserved for “experts.”

Drawing from lived experiences, it is often observed that when disasters occur, formal responses typically involve fumigation, containment, or relocating victims to temporary shelters arranged by authorities. While these actions are necessary, they tend to overlook the human and communal dimensions of disaster response. Communities frequently ask questions such as: “If the situation is like this, what can we do collectively to help?” Such questions reflect an instinctive process of communal assessment, aligning with the Ubudlelane principles of empathy and shared responsibility (Xweso & Gwam, 2024). For instance, community members often spontaneously organise to provide food, clothing, and other forms of material support to those affected. These acts of sharing symbolise the deep cultural value of communality and demonstrate that early intervention is not solely technical but also relational and participatory. Therefore, social workers must anchor their practice in participatory assessment methods that build on these communal responses, collaborating with both the community and formal authorities to ensure that disaster management reflects the values and strengths of those most directly affected.

5.2 Step 2: Animating communal support systems

The second phase of the disaster framework within the context of *ubudlelane* focuses on activating communal support systems, where social workers play a crucial role in mobilising resources and support networks. This phase involves identifying individuals and resources that can collectively assist the community in the aftermath of a disaster. As Rautenbach and Nadesan (2023) assert, social workers act as mobilisers, stating that they are “those who identify the unmet needs of a community and bring together people and resources to implement positive change in the community” (p.19). Collecting community resources during this response phase not only provides immediate assistance but also serves as an assessment of the community’s capacity to address the challenges it faces.

Since this phase follows the participatory problem assessment, it also supports participatory action planning, guided by the caring values inherent in *ubudlelane*. This approach ensures that interventions leverage the strengths and resources of community members to assist those affected by the disaster. Social workers are key actors in driving the mobilisation and coordination of resources, collaborating closely with community development practitioners and other disaster risk professionals to enhance integrated disaster response efforts. When aligned with the levels of disaster intervention at the institutional and *Inqanaba leNgingqi* (macro) levels, mobilisation efforts benefit from meaningful collaborations. For instance, institutions can provide financial resources to rebuild homes, while the community, guided by the values of *ubudlelane*, may share clothing or offer temporary shelter for neighbours awaiting permanent housing.

5.3 Step 3: Ubudlelane-convergence

At this stage, the convergence of human and physical resources becomes critical in addressing the needs of disaster-affected populations, particularly those who have lost their homes. In our framework, this convergence is conceptualised as *ubudlelane convergence* or *indibano-ngobudlelane*, referring to the assembly of resource systems (both material and human) activated in response to a crisis. It is essential that social workers act as brokers and facilitators of this convergence, ensuring that resources are mobilised equitably, efficiently, and in ways that align with the needs of the affected community (Nyahunda & Ncube, 2025; Matlakala, Makhubele & Nyahunda, 2022). The

convergence of human capital should adopt a humanising approach, ensuring that recovery processes are grounded in the principles of social justice. Nyahunda and Ncube (2025) emphasise that social workers are uniquely positioned to address the social injustices that prevent communities from effectively responding to climate change impacts and disasters. These injustices include the unequal distribution of resources, entrenched gender inequalities, and disparities in access to information. In this emerging resilience renaissance, social justice and human rights must remain central pillars, guiding intervention and recovery efforts. This perspective aligns with the principles of *ubudlelane*, particularly empathy and understanding, which social workers can nurture throughout the *ubudlelane* convergence (collaborations) process to strengthen ethically grounded relationships aimed at fostering togetherness and inclusive resilience.

The convergence at this stage is participatory, representing meaningful connections between institutions and *inqanaba lenginqi* (community-level) approaches that provide critical initial steps in framing sustainable solutions. Within these approaches, facilitation is led by the affected individuals themselves (Ozerdem & Bowd, 2010; Meyer et al., 2018). When disasters strike, community members are often temporarily displaced, seeking refuge in communal facilities or halls, and may experience feelings of abandonment and hopelessness due to the loss of their homes and stability (Matlakala, Makhubele, & Nyahunda, 2022). At such times, it is imperative for social workers to amplify the voices of those affected to ensure ownership, dignity, and agency in both response and recovery processes (Dominelli, 2023; Meyer et al., 2018).

An important implication of the *ubudlelane* convergence is the potential for collaboration between cultural leaders, social workers, and technical experts through the establishment of cultural response forums. These forums could serve as spaces where culturally rooted practices of healing are articulated and integrated into recovery pathways, while institutions provide structured plans to address material and psychosocial needs. Such collaborations not only accelerate the pace of healing but also ensure that recovery processes are embedded in both cultural significance and institutional support, thereby fostering resilience that is holistic and sustainable.

5.4 Step 4: Community healing

The fourth phase of the *ubudlelane* disaster response framework centres on community healing, which transcends conventional trauma counselling by incorporating culturally grounded practices aimed at restoring hope, resilience, and social cohesion. Healing in this context encompasses not only the engagement with formal Eurocentric approaches but also the integration of traditional healers, such as Izangoma and Inyanga, who communicate with Izinyanya (ancestors) through rituals and ceremonies to address the spiritual dimensions of disasters. Rahmani, Muzwagi, and Pumariaga (2022) assert that culture plays a critical role in shaping individuals' experiences of disasters, the development of adaptive strategies, and the processing of external aid and support. While this perspective may be perceived as elusive by some scientists, it holds significant meaning within many African communities, where disasters are often viewed as manifestations of ancestral discontent. Such practices are believed to facilitate reconciliation between the community and its spiritual and cultural foundations.

For instance, during periods of drought, community members frequently ascend the mountains to pray to Qamata (God) for rain and visit the kraal to seek the intervention of their ancestors in order to ensure rainfall; conversely, these spiritual practices are also invoked to mitigate excessive rains or flooding (Tirivangasi & Nyahunda, 2024). These traditions illustrate that community spiritual resources are deeply trusted and, when considered within the framework of community healing, highlight the essential role of cultural and spiritual systems in recovery. For example, Tirivangasi and Nyahunda (2024) conducted a study in the Chimanimani district of Zimbabwe, providing evidence that biblical knowledge significantly aids community members in preparing for both slow- and sudden-onset climatic events. Their findings indicated that Christian participants were not only

well-versed in scriptural teachings but also held a profound belief that storms, famines, or sudden floods would ultimately not harm them. Even in the face of disasters, Christianity served as a crucial source of healing and resilience, enabling participants to maintain trust in divine will. Many interpreted such events as divine communication, calling for repentance and a recommitment to spiritual practice.

A practical intervention by social workers, conducted in consultation with affected community members, may take the form of cultural healing circles approached through the lens of *ubudlelane*. According to Matlakala et al. (2022), facilitating group work is a key role of social workers; however, the *ubudlelane* framework extends this role to incorporate cultural and spiritual dimensions. In practice, this may involve social workers co-facilitating healing circles alongside traditional healers or cultural leaders within the community, thereby ensuring that the healing process is grounded in participants' lived experiences and cultural attachments. Tirivangasi and Nyahunda (2024) further emphasise the centrality of traditional ceremonies in the healing process. Within the context of *ubudlelane*-informed healing circles, social workers could facilitate, with the consent of community members, cleansing ceremonies or other culturally significant rituals in collaboration with traditional leaders or healers, thereby connecting participants with culturally meaningful sources of healing. Simultaneously, the framework allows for inclusivity: Christian participants may draw on faith-based practices, while non-religious members or those adhering to other spiritual traditions are equally supported in ways that respect their beliefs and experiences.

Community healing, therefore, is not merely a response to immediate trauma but a preparatory process that strengthens the community's adaptive capacity, ensuring it can navigate future challenges while remaining anchored in its cultural values and systems. By integrating indigenous knowledge, spiritual practices, and communal solidarity, social workers can foster holistic recovery, resilience, and sustainable well-being that reflect the ethical and moral principles of *ubudlelane*.

5.5 Step 5: Ubudlelane-sustained resilience

The ultimate phase of the Ubudlelane disaster response framework is *ubudlelane*-sustained resilience. At this stage, a critical question arises: is resilience an individual attribute of those affected by a disaster, or is it fundamentally a communal trait rooted in collective solidarity and mutual responsibility? Our understanding aligns with the perspective of Tata Desmond Tutu (2009), as further elaborated by Lunga et al. (2024), that Ubuntu—closely associated with Ubudlelane—positions resilience not as an individual characteristic but as a collective moral identity that binds communities through shared responsibility.

Accordingly, resilience goes beyond merely providing material assistance to those who have lost their homes; it is defined by the communal pooling of resources, mutual support, and collective action that sustains the community long after the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Lunga et al. (2024) further emphasise that integrating Ubuntu into disaster response frames resilience as a cultural and ethical identity: no single household can endure the trauma of losing a home in isolation, as the values of oneness and mutual care underpin communal survival. Ubudlelane similarly underscores the significance of interdependence and shared responsibility in fostering enduring community strength (Xweso & Gwam, 2024).

At this phase of sustained resilience, the convergence of Ubudlelane-based interventions operationalises a practical ideal, ensuring that communities maintain their adaptive capacity through collective action and ethical solidarity. Van Breda (2018) describes resilience as a dynamic process of mitigating risk factors, situated within the broader framework of social ecology or the person-in-environment perspective, rather than being confined solely to the individual. In line with this view, we contend that post-disaster mitigation must also draw upon culturally resonant healing tools, including indigenous knowledge systems and locally grounded forms of meaning-making.

Acknowledging and integrating these cultural constructions is essential for fostering effective solutions to mitigate adversity.

6. Lessons for Social Work Disaster Responses and Future Policy Implications

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters in Southern Africa provide significant lessons for social work practice, particularly within contexts characterised by vulnerability and limited resources (Dominelli, 2023; Nyahunda & Ncube, 2025). These experiences illustrate that disasters not only undermine physical and economic assets but also disrupt social fabrics and weaken community cohesion. From these realities, a key implication emerges: the indigenous philosophy of *ubudlelane*, rooted in interconnectedness, mutual care, and shared responsibility (Xweso & Gwam, 2024), offers a valuable framework for enhancing social work responses. Its principles direct practitioners towards strategies that restore solidarity, bolster community resilience, and ensure that interventions are not only technically effective but also socially and culturally relevant.

Examining disaster response through the *ubudlelane* lens and utilising participatory problem-assessment processes has been shown to be more effective in both disaster risk reduction and recovery. Such approaches leverage local knowledge, reinforce agency, and foster resilience (Ozerdem & Bowd, 2010; Meyer et al., 2018). At its essence, this perspective acknowledges the necessity of incorporating individuals and their intrinsic resources in efforts to mitigate disaster impacts and facilitate healing for those affected. Within the context of *ubudlelane*, disasters are understood not merely as external shocks to be managed by experts, but as collective disruptions that require the collaborative mobilisation of human, cultural, and material resources. This understanding corresponds with evidence from Southern African contexts, where communal values, faith systems, and reciprocal support have significantly influenced how communities interpret, respond to, and recover from disasters (Matlakala et al., 2022; Tirivangasi & Nyahunda, 2024). Within this framework, social workers assume a critical role as social brokers and facilitators, ensuring the optimal mobilisation and integration of resources to cultivate sustained resilience.

For social workers, the implications are twofold. First, disaster response must transcend a technocratic orientation, embracing relational, community-focused frameworks that prioritise dignity, voice, and inclusion. Positioned as cultural brokers and facilitators, social workers can play an essential role in convening participatory dialogues, mapping community assets, and enabling an equitable convergence of resources (Nyahunda & Ncube, 2025). Second, *ubudlelane* serves as a corrective to the often paternalistic tendencies inherent in disaster interventions, which may inadvertently disempower those affected. Instead, it underscores the co-production of recovery pathways, ensuring that affected populations are not passive recipients, but rather active agents in their own recovery (Dominelli, 2023).

When applied in disaster response, *ubudlelane* has the potential to reshape the profession's orientation towards disaster-affected communities. Its relational ethic offers a culturally grounded framework through which social workers can engage with communities, restore agency, and strengthen resilience. The policy implication is that disaster management frameworks should incorporate indigenous philosophies, such as *ubudlelane*, to complement global disaster risk reduction agendas. In practice, this necessitates training social workers not only in technical disaster response skills but also in facilitating participatory processes rooted in communal values and local epistemologies. By doing so, social workers can ensure that disaster interventions are both contextually relevant and socially just, advancing a vision of resilience that is relational, inclusive, and sustainable. Furthermore, this shift should be reflected in social work education, where curricula are reoriented to integrate African epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems in disaster response efforts. Such an approach would represent a transformative step in preparing social

workers to engage meaningfully with culturally grounded practices, thereby equipping them to contribute to sustainable community futures.

6.1 Limitations

This article does not rely on empirical data from Mthatha or any other specific locality; rather, it presents a conceptual and innovative narrative for rethinking disaster response through the lens of *ubudlelane*, a relational ethic grounded in practices of sharing and collective sustenance—often articulated as “breaking bread”—that is already present in numerous communities. The discussion advances the argument that disaster response interventions can be enhanced by engaging indigenous relational frameworks such as *ubudlelane*, which prioritise reciprocity, mutual care, and communal responsibility in moments of crisis. However, a significant limitation of this work is its lack of empirical validation, as the proposed framework has not yet been tested or applied in a real-world disaster context to substantiate its practical effectiveness. Future studies are therefore encouraged to empirically investigate the *ubudlelane* disaster response framework, employing quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, in order to assess its efficacy, scalability, and relevance in diverse disaster-affected settings.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has reflected upon the role of *ubudlelane* in enhancing social work responses to disaster-induced housing loss, emphasising its applicability across micro, mezzo, macro, and institutional levels of intervention. Key arguments highlight that effective disaster response transcends mere material assistance, necessitating participatory, culturally grounded approaches that mobilise communal solidarity, resources, and collective action. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge by positioning *ubudlelane* as an empowering relational framework that illustrates how resilience and recovery are sustained through shared responsibility and ethical community engagement, rather than through individualised interventions alone. Furthermore, by aligning disaster response practices with indigenous philosophies such as *ubudlelane*, social work interventions advance the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), promoting inclusive, safe, and resilient human settlements. These insights underscore the transformative potential of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into social work practice and advocate for further research and practice that foreground such philosophies to ensure disaster interventions are culturally congruent, ethically informed, and locally empowered.

9. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (M.X. & Z.G.); Literature review (M.X., Z.G., & G.M.); methodology (M.X.); software (N/A.); validation (N/A.); formal analysis (M.X., Z.G., & G.M.); investigation (M.X., Z.G., & G.M.); data curation (N/A); drafting and preparation (M.X. & Z.G.); review and editing (M.X. & G.M.); supervision (N/A); project administration (M.X.); funding acquisition (N/A.). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

Funding: The study receives no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: This study did not generate or analyse any new data. It is based on conceptual, theoretical, or opinion-based arguments and does not rely on an empirical database.

AI Usage: The authors confirm that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation or writing of this work.

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