

# Stronger Together

## Sir Lowry's Pass

September 2023

**“What happened that day was nothing short of a miracle. People pulled together selflessly to assist those less fortunate, and in most cases unknown to them.”** *Paulus Coetzee, Farm Watch medic.*

### Dramatis Personae

Checkers, Helderberg public company

Child Welfare Somerset West, Helderberg non-profit organization

Community Leaders, Jennifer Esterhuizen (Uitkyk), Athi Ndwebi (Rasta camp)

Disaster Management Department, City of Cape Town.

Farm Watch, Sir Lowry's Pass, public benefit organization propelled by local residents

Gift of the Givers, non-profit organization

Humble Beginnings, Sir Lowry's Pass Village non-profit organization

Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority, Western Cape

Pick n Pay, South Africa public company

South African National Defence Force, Joint Tactical Headquarters, Western Cape

South African Police Service

SAS, private security company

Somerset West Night Shelter , Helderberg non-profit organization

Various churches including: Seventh Day Adventists Silverleaf, New Apostolic 1819, Catholic Church of Somerset West.

Village Collaboration, Sir Lowry's Pass Village, non-profit organization



### Catalyst

The South African Weather Service issued a level 9 storm warning at 14h30 on Sunday, 24th September 2023 for several areas in the Western Cape.

A level 9 warning forecasts heavy downpours of 100-150 mm of rain. Winds are gale-force. What occurred was far worse.

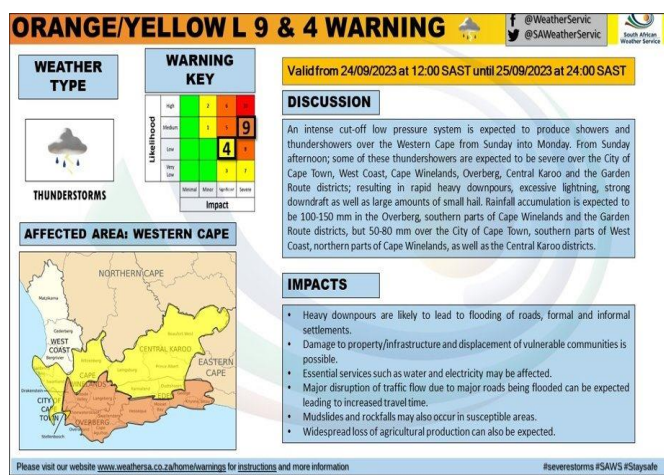
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On the farm Cottage Stream, in the Sir Lowry's Pass district, 212 mm of rain fell in 12 hours.

On the other side of the Hottentots Holland mountains, in the Overberg, farmers recorded between 250-300 mm of rain in 12 hours.

Ironically, the map of the affected areas (see below) shows that Sir Lowry's Pass was in a Level 4 warning area.



This downpour fell onto fully saturated ground, the Western Cape having recorded one of its wettest winters ever. No more water could be absorbed by the earth which created a flash flood.

The 24th September is a public holiday in South Africa, which meant that the 25th, the Monday, was too. This fact turned out to be a blessing as many working members of the public had time to help.

People all over the Cape Town Metro and the wider area were adversely affected. Delft, Macassar, Kays Caravan Park, Stormhaven, Eerste River, parts of Khayalitsha all found themselves under water.

Reports from farms in the Overberg describe mudslides and wetlands being ripped off the mountain, where now only bare rock lies. Canyons have been cleaved where roads once existed. A section of railway line is hanging several meters above the ground.

So, what happened on the Sir Lowry's Pass side of the mountain was relatively mild in comparison, from an environmental point of view.

Here, however, people's lives were affected

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## Catastrophe

### Village

Farm Watch, a registered and accredited NPO with the Department of Community Safety, focuses on community safety and is powered entirely by local volunteers. The organization was first aware that something was amiss at 03h30 when one member received a call that horses in a paddock adjacent to the Sir Lowry's Pass River were in need of relocating due to rising water levels.

At this stage, no-one at Farm Watch realized what was happening in the village.

It was only when daylight came that the true scale of the flood was revealed.

One village resident, however, who was standing on her porch at 01h00 on Monday morning, saw the rising waters.



Colleen Pienaar, who describes herself as a “nice lady in a broken village” had been preparing for the worst when the Level 9 storm warning was issued.

Jennifer Esterhuizen, Community Leader of Uitkyk, the worst affected area, describes the event.

“At around 21h00 we noticed water coming through our door. The rain was falling softly so we weren't alarmed. We just swept it out again.

But it slowly got worse, becoming more and more muddy as the night wore on.

My husband was outside making trenches around the house to take the water away.

Then we noticed that there was a waterfall coming over from the rugby field and we were cut off from the roadway by a torrent.

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At around midnight my family made the decision to evacuate. My husband tied a rope around his waist and waded through the rushing water with my daughters and me hanging onto the rope.

We made it to the roadside where a number of other families had gathered.

The road itself was a river.”



As the floodwaters rose people had difficulty getting out of their front doors.

“One Auntie had to be pulled out of her window,” says Esterhuizen.

Athi Ndwebi, the Community Leader for the area known as Rasta Camp, downstream from Uitkyk, adds his perspective of the fateful night.

“We were communicating on WhatsApp with the people from Uitkyk, so we knew it was getting scary up there.

At 21h00 I contacted Disaster Management Operations Centre to ask them to open the Community Hall but their hands were tied as it falls under the Parks & Recreation Department. There’s a protocol that needs to be followed to allow access to it.

People were running around as the water got higher and higher. It was chaos.

“We tried opening the drains to allow for better outflows but it wasn’t enough.



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Using a loudhailer, the South African Police Service was calling people to get out of their houses.

A tree fell onto one house with elderly people sleeping inside. No-one was hurt and we got them out.”

Before midnight people had started congregating on a little piece of high ground next to the Sir Lowry's Pass sign.

A couple of fires were made to try and keep them warm. There was no shelter.

They were effectively marooned, and sodden, with swirling floodwaters around them.

One man arrived wearing nothing but his underwear and dressing gown.

**“As a Community Leader I always have to be strong, but that night I cried.”**

Jennifer Esterhuizen, Community Leader, Uitkyk.

As reality sunk in, people realized that their abandoned homes were sitting ducks for looters.

Unfortunately, this concern was well justified as several homes were broken into and robbed, adding to the anxiety of the victims.

Ndwebi details how snakes and frogs also sought the high ground, having been flushed from their safe havens.

As the floodwaters rose, people started going back to fetch precious belongings. One man was seen rescuing some puppies.

At this time, the only clue that they were dealing with more than a simple flood was that it was “smelly”.



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Several community members brought flasks of tea to the afflicted, helping to keep them warm.

Esterhuizen and Ndwebi describe the mood of the people huddled together.

“We were all in shock, frightened and wrecked. We knew something had to be done but we didn’t know what. We didn’t know what we could do.”

“Nevertheless, there was a great feeling of Ubuntu”, he says.

At first light, many returned to their homes, trying to fathom the destruction.

It was only then, feeling their way through the floodwater that they realized there was something else amiss.

“Feeling with our bare feet, we would either sink or suddenly rise onto a sandbank where there shouldn’t be one,” says Esterhuizen.

At some stage during the night Ndwebi alerted Colonel Fleischman of the South African Police Service. She came out at 02h00 to see for herself the dire situation people were in.

“I saw a wendy house rocking like a boat in a rough sea. It was tied to a pole. When the pole toppled it was swept away by the water.”

*Athi Ndwebi, Community Leader, Rastacamp.*



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## Where did all the sand come from?

While many people in the Western Cape were affected by flooding, what made Uitkyk in Sir Lowry's Pass unique was the sand and mud that washed down.

Houses were literally smothered by sludge.

Approximately 120 people were affected with 23 homes made completely uninhabitable.

As the floodwaters receded the true scale of the disaster was revealed.

While many were left with nothing but the shirts on their backs, some community members still maintained a sense of honour not wanting to burden others with their problems - an admirable attribute considering its opposite, a sense of entitlement.

As Athi Ndwebi underlines:

"We were not only being helped but we also helped others. Like the rich people who got stuck in the mud on the road in their 4x4s. We were helping to push them out."

Paulus Coetzee, the Farm Watch medic recalls seeing children rolling up their trousers and wading through the waters to push SUVs out of the mud.

In true South African fashion, humour stitched itself through the catastrophe.

## "We gonna swim tonight."

*Elaine Titus, resident of Rasta Camp.*

When photographing the community leaders for this publication, one said to the other: "Don't smile, it's a disaster", with a big grin on her face.

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## Surrounding area

Damage to infrastructure was not restricted to the village.

Upstream, farmers reported massive erosion, with four bridges having been washed away or collapsed on the 66-hectare Cottage Stream Farm alone.

Wedderwil, a nearby lifestyle estate, was completely cut off from the outside world with its access road covered in mud and rocks.

## Response

Colleen Pienaar, a Village Collaboration member, was approached early on Monday by Evette Lodewyk, a resident of Uitkyk, the worst affected area with a list of the displaced families.

Evette had walked through the morass to Colleen, noting the names of the afflicted families and people as she did so.

Given the severity of the situation with hundreds of people standing outside in the wet and the cold, getting more and more agitated, at around 9h00 on Monday 25th September 2023 it was decided by community members to access the Community Hall under guidance.





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“People were cold,  
hungry and  
confused.”

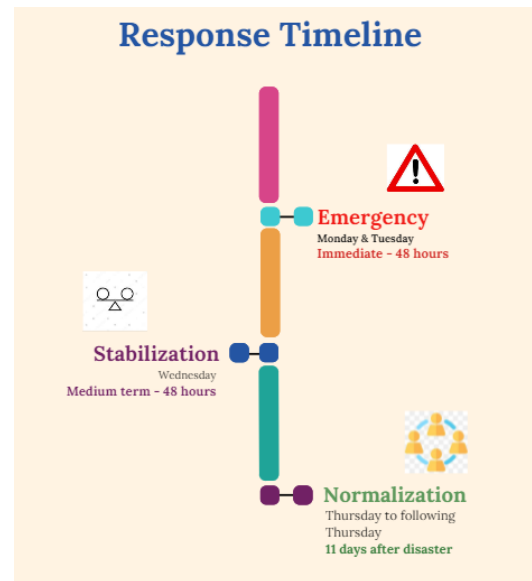
Colleen Pienaar.



## Farm Watch

“Farm Watch is a volunteer organisation whose mandate is to render aid to neighbours in an emergency”, says Ryan Norris, Chairman of the organization. “The first 48 hours are critical in a disaster like this. This is the time that people reorient themselves to the new situation and take stock of their situation.”

As it turned out, the first four days of relief coalesced around Farm Watch volunteers. One observer pointed out that Farm Watch really was the civil hero of the disaster.



## Emergency Phase

Immediate 48 hours (Monday & Tuesday)

### Medical attention:

“Hypothermia was our chief concern”, says Paulus Coetzee a qualified medic on site as soon as the Community Hall opened.

Miraculously, he attended to one injury only, a laceration on the foot of a child who had walked barefoot through the water.

### Security:

In the role of First Responder, Farm Watch had already posted marshals at the entrance to the village to warn motorists that there was no access.

From 10h30 Metro Police took over this function.

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Later in the day, when women and children spent the night in the Community Hall and their men stood guard over the remains of their belongings at home, Farm Watch provided a lock so that the women and children could lock themselves in.

## Monitoring process

Members of Farm Watch started counting the people coming to the Community Hall at 10h00. The trickle soon turned to a flood, with over 4,120 people passing through its doors during the first 48 hours.



## Shelter, food & sustenance

Within two hours of the call going out, 90 blankets were delivered to the Community Hall, the funds provided by one of the residential estates nearby.

As donations were received food and hot beverages were served to anyone who wanted them.

During the stabilization phase, and when Gift of the Givers got involved, this was harmonized to twice a day.

The drains at the Community Hall were blocked. Farm Watch organized Drain Man to clear them.

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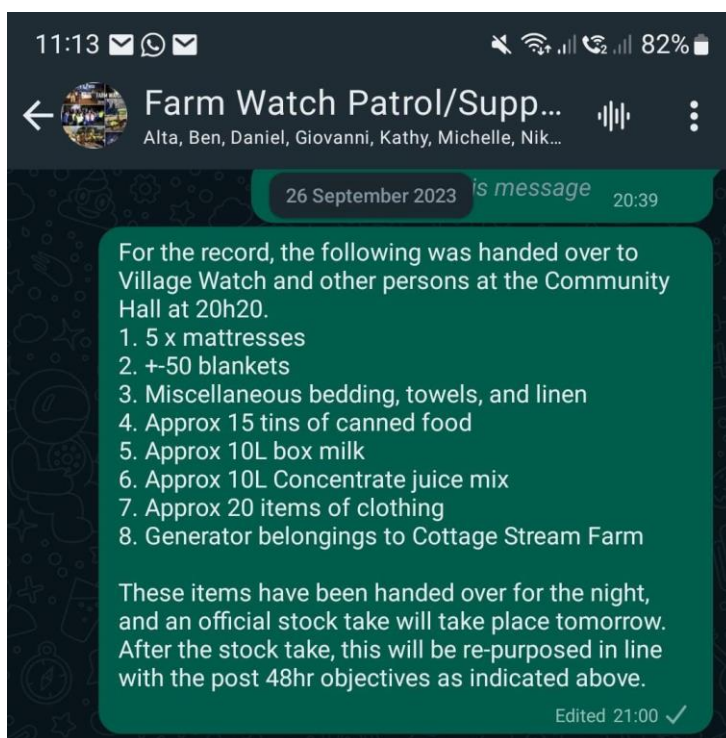
## Access

While the roads were impassable it was left to Farm Watch members to deliver donated food stuffs to the Community Hall and to transport people who needed to cross the river, into the village.

Fortunately, for residents in the higher-lying areas, a local farmer took it upon himself to maintain a back road, thereby providing a route around the village. If this had not occurred several hundred people would have been trapped and isolated for at least four days.



Farm Watch handed over control of the Community Hall at 21h00 on Tuesday, 26th September 2023 to Village Watch, having fulfilled its mandate of rendering assistance in an emergency.



However, Farm Watch's off-site assistance continued:

- Depot for distribution of critical needs.
- Clearing of roads and access points.



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Farm Watch volunteers selflessly serving those in need of sustenance.

One community member estimated that during the initial phase of the response, before the community leaders had time to draw up lists of those left homeless, 75% of the donated relief went to those who were only wet and cold.

“If some people exploited the kindness of concerned neighbours and got a bowl of soup out of it, it doesn’t really matter, almost everyone was cold and wet.”

Ryan Norris, Farm Watch Chair.

## Disaster Management

The City of Cape Town’s Disaster Management Official for the Helderberg, Johan van der Westhuizen, was first alerted to the situation in Sir Lowry’s Pass during the late morning of the 25th September.

Volunteers were sent to assess the situation in the Community Hall and realized that the immediate needs of the community were being met by Farm Watch, and later, Gift of the Givers.



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“The priority when people are faced with a catastrophe is to give them shelter, food and hot drinks. This immediately calms the situation as their immediate needs are met. Then the conversation and organization can start about how to remedy the situation in the longer term.”

Johan van der Westhuizen, Disaster Management, City of Cape Town.

For Disaster Management, the task then was to look at the engineering side of things. A Joint Operations Centre was set up at the Sir Lowry's Pass Fire Station where the different City departments started planning. A priority was to clear the main access road into the village. This commenced on the afternoon of the 25th. By the end of the 30th the road was fully open again.



## Gift of the Givers

“When the floods hit Sir Lowry's Pass Village some community members called us and sent through photographs. We sent teams through to do assessments”, explained Ali Sablay of Gift of the Givers.

The organization then assisted the community with hot nutritional meals for seven days, blankets, personal hygiene items and baby care packs distributed through the Community Hall.

“We have a very good relationship with the village and the clinic. We've run many interventions in the village prior to this one.”



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## Community

Community leaders proved vital in the liaison between affected members and all other role players.



Athi Ndwebi & Jennifer Esterhuizen, Community Leaders for Rastacamp & Uitkyk respectively.

One man arrived at the Community Hall soaked through and shivering like a leaf. He had lost his entire house. He offered to help the other afflicted, saying that he may as well help, as there was nothing left at home.

Another arrived at the Community Hall with the identity documents of two old women who were stranded at home in bed. He had waded through the floodwaters to get them some soup.

## Stabilization

### Medium Term 48 hrs (Wednesday)

As things began to stabilize various role players found their groove. The following assistance was provided:

Farm Watch continued to identify needs, solicit donations, collect and inventory these donations at off-site depots to distribute them through the established channels of relief e.g. soup kitchens.



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The weather forecast for Friday 29th September 2023 predicted further heavy downpours.

350 sandbags and waterproof sheeting for 70 houses were bought/donated and distributed to affected homes.

Other non-profits used their channels to issue further relief e.g. the Village Collaboration issued spades and buckets to affected households to start the cleanup. It also supplied ingredients to soup kitchens and food parcels to those most adversely affected.

Previously entrenched pet feeding schemes proceeded as people grappled with the devastation in their lives.



Humble Beginnings gave out clothes and bedding to the displaced.

Gift of the Givers assisted with hot nutritional meals for seven days, blankets, personal hygiene items and baby care packs.

Disaster Management agreed with the community leaders that the City of Cape Town would take responsibility for clearing around the houses and the doors to allow residents access to their homes.

The internal clear-up would be the left to the residents themselves.



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South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Members of the Joint Tactical Headquarters Western Cape informally collected clothes and bedding that were divided between Sir Lowry's Pass and other affected areas within the Metropole.



Jammies de Kock member of J Tac HQ WC explains: "This is the military unit responsible for Safety and Security in the Western Cape. We attend Provincial Disaster meetings in case we need to assist from the SANDF side. I was thus informed of the havoc that awaited the province from the early warnings of the weather department.

"As soldiers we have more exposure to disaster than the average person. It's still a shock to see the devastation that nature can inflict on human beings."

Jammies de Kock, J Tac HQ WC.

Although South Africa has formal departments and organisations that attend to the need of the community during disasters, the contribution by the man in the street should not to be downplayed. Every bit helps, also acting as an *esprit-de-corps* in the communities."





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## Normalization

48 hours+ (Thurs – Thurs)  
11 days

### Farm Watch Statistics

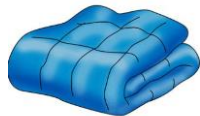
Relief provided by private citizens and churches.

Immediate Aid (48 Hours):



Provided **two meals a day** for approximately **4,120 people.**

Distributed blankets and clothing to those in need.



Donated a generator and a digger loader for operational support.

**R35,000**

Received/distributed financial donations.

Medium and Extended Term Support: (48hours – 7 days);

Supplied **7 soup kitchens** for 1 week



each feeding **75-100 people per day** – assisting up to **7,000 people.**



Delivered **100 care parcels** to displaced families.

Provided waterproof sheeting for **70 houses.**



Distributed **350 sandbags** to affected houses.

Engaged **51 dedicated volunteers** in relief efforts.



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Farm Watch involvement officially ended on 5th October 2023, eleven days after the event.

**City Services** continued to clear around the houses of Uitkyk and cleared out the river.

**Village Collaboration** soup kitchens and food parcels continued.

The generosity of the wider community cannot be underestimated. From members of the South African National Defence Force to ordinary people making sandwiches in their kitchens. It was marvellous to witness.

**“I’m in awe of the community. What was done in a short space of time was magnificent.”**

Vanessa Bam, Farm Watch member.

## Challenges

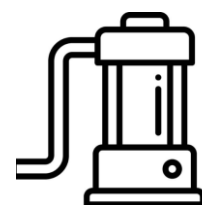
**Misinformation and rumour** were major challenges. Some were driven by political agenda, others by ignorance and mistrust.

### Opening of sluice gates

Another misleading fabrication was that the farmers upstream had opened their sluice gates and released the water that flooded homes. There are no sluice gates upstream.

In fact, the dams upstream are like sumps, thereby regulating the torrent of a flash flood.

The dams this author visited are fed by the river through offtake pipes. Any overflow from the dams is then fed back into the river via a channel as the dam level rises.





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## Illegal Occupation of Government Subsidized Houses

When people heard that Farm Watch was withdrawing from the Community Hall at the 48 hour first responder cutoff time, the rumour went round that it would be closed and the homeless would have no shelter.

This was untrue. The Community Hall remained open to those in need.

This spurred 100-120 people to take illegal occupation of more than sixty houses under construction in the village.

Official services were called and by nightfall all illegal occupants had been reassured that the Community Hall remained open and they peacefully left.

Unfortunately, a significant amount of damage was caused, which has proven detrimental to the communities themselves.

31 x External Doors had to be replaced.

61 x 3 lever locks had to be replaced.

27 x External doors had marks and graffiti that had to be removed and revarnished,

5 x Houses had graffiti on the external walls and had to be painted.

**“All it does is delay benefits to those who deserve to be relocated.”**

Johan van der Westhuizen, Disaster Management

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## Exploitation, Manipulation, Vandalism, Theft

City workers were blocked from clearing homes with the digger loaders.

This caused a two-hour delay and it was only after the City threatened to withdraw altogether that community members capitulated.

## Vandalism of Community Hall

As soon as the plumbing had been repaired it was cut again by vandals. Reports of people removing the parquet floor and of dog excrement on the floor also filtered out.

Theft and freeloading by undeserving people at the Community Hall led to conflict within the community.

Unfortunately, this behaviour undermines the dignity, and goodwill, of all concerned becoming a feedback loop that is self-defeating.

## Recriminations

Several fingers were pointed by members of the community to those they thought were undeserving.

Johan van der Westhuizen of the Disaster Management Department elaborated:

“In my experience the first 48 hours after a disaster there is always a sense of organized disorganization. You can plan as much as you want but plans are guidelines and no two disasters are ever the same.”

**“This is not the  
time for  
recrimination.”**

Paulus Coetzee, Farm Watch medic



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## Hate Mail

Astonishingly, Farm Watch received hate mail during the course of the relief effort.

*This is a disgrace.*

*When you do disaster care. YOU CARE. or else you bloody well leave it! Your hall people HAVE NO WATER. THE COMUNITY HALL is a health hazzard.*

*There is no electricity. There is no water. Theyve been in there for a week.*

*What are they. Animals to you?! WHERE THE HELL IS YOUR DISATER MANAGEMENT.*

*IVE sat with city reps this morning.*

*Ive spoken to dr Johan Minnie.*

*So please get a better plan. Because what you are doing now is inhumane.*

*There is no trauma counselling involved WHY NOT??*

Farm Watch did not respond to such messages but did take great care about releasing information on public platforms that could lead to troublesome and even violent confrontation.

Information on donation drop off points and the major donors were therefore kept within the Farm Watch community.

To repeat, Farm Watch is a civic organization that serves as a first responder when people are faced with disaster. Any ongoing efforts are intended to assist established organisations in normalizing their operations.



**“Unfortunately, such comments from outsiders sucked energy from our efforts.”**

Ryan Norris, Farm Watch chairperson

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## Road blockades

Twenty-five days after the floods residents of Sir Lowry's Pass residents woke to road blockades across the main access roads.

It was triggered by the fact that the people in the Community Hall had been given notice to vacate it.

While the local Ward Councillor had addressed the people in the hall, the wider community of Uitkyk felt ignored and wanted to know what solutions had been found for them.

Norman McFarlane, Ward Councillor explained:

"I engaged with the people in the hall last week about today's move and updated them on the land acquisition."

However, it should be noted that many families affected by the floods were not staying in the hall, having found alternative accommodation with friends and families.





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“Sometimes good things come from bad.”

Paulus Coetzee, Farm Watch medic.

## Positives

### SASSA & Home Affairs

Community members reached out to Social Development & Home affairs as many households lost all their documentation. Both departments responded promptly and set up a small satellite office in the village to retake vital information so that pension and identity cards could be reissued quickly.

## Upliftment opportunities

The City's plans for the people of Uitkyk were being formalised at the time of going to print.

### Education

One unexpected donor six weeks after the event was a collaboration between the LG SETA, the Insurance SETA, the City's Disaster Management Team and Pick n Pay.

Food parcels, dignity packs, blankets and children's packs were distributed in the village.

This is seen as a launch pad for a longer-term engagement with Sir Lowry's Pass Village.

“We're using the disaster as a gateway to connect with the village in order to provide needs-based training.

Aneeka Jacobs, Provincial Manager,  
Local Government Seta





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It should be noted here that vandals and haters discourage charity. They deplete energy and resources when so much goodwill is in evidence. Most importantly, those who act in opposition undermine the community and should be called out as saboteurs.

The authorities should be mindful of addressing segments of a community as in the case of updating the Uitkyk members in the Community Hall but not the wider community of Uitkyk.



## Volunteer Relief

Farm Watch members needed relief in the Community Hall. While the expectation to fill the personnel void naturally fell to Disaster Management in the first 48 hours, that department had its hands full with the widespread flooding in the province.

Community members should step in to fill this void. Identifying such roles as security, depot control/stock taking, dispensing of food and drink and registration before a disaster will assist in the efficient distribution of aid.

## Continued monitoring

Once Farm Watch withdrew from the Community Hall pre-existing distribution systems kicked into action. As donations continued to flood into the Farm Watch depots it was felt that a supervisor should ensure their fair distribution. This is highlighted for future events.

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## Why did it happen?

Ultimately, the question is why was there such devastation on the banks of the Sir Lowry's Pass River.

The answer is multifaceted.



### Amount of rain

A rough estimate of the area of rainfall on 24th September shows that **3,2 billion litres of water** was released into the Sir Lowry's Pass River system over approximately **eighteen hours**.

212mm was recorded on the lower slopes of the Hottentots Holland mountains. It would have been much more higher up.

The runoff was exacerbated by the fact that the ground was already saturated due to heavy winter rainfall.

Climate change scientists have been warning of more extreme weather patterns for years.

Addressing the problem meaningfully at a global level appears to be out of reach.

All we can do is to take measures to mitigate the local effects of an increasingly volatile weather system.

### Environmental issues

Plantations of non-indigenous trees died during the last fire. Their roots, therefore, no longer held the soil. The trees toppled easily as the soil washed away, causing blockages in the river system, which in turn created diversions and further erosion associated with the new channels.

The erosion in one section extended for 250 metres with the river bed dropping at least 5 metres.

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In one place the river, which was around six metres wide, became more than 25 metres wide during the flood.

A rough calculation of this area alone shows an estimated 28,000 cubic metres of soil, sand and debris washed down the river, settling when it encountered homes and any other obstructions.

To put this in some kind of perspective we're talking about one entire rugby field being covered with approximately 6 metres of soil.

That's a lot of earth.

## Long term resolution

### People and Infrastructure

The City of Cape Town has confirmed that the people from Uitkyk will be provided with alternative land and accommodation. The Land Invasion Department will prevent more people moving into the area.

The flooding in the Western Cape was officially declared a National Disaster in November 2023. This allows provinces to apply to national government for funding to repair damage to infrastructure, such as buildings, roads, bridges and water networks.

It is estimated that the damage in the Western Cape alone is to the order of R441 million for provincial infrastructure and R154 million for municipal damages.

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## Restoration of the indigenous riparian ecosystems

Ultimately, the restoration of indigenous flora is the goal.

Using original ecosystem structures is a no-brainer as it requires little human management and costs.

However, landowners, need to be willing participants in the solution.

By collaborating with academia, government and philanthropic sectors, innovative ways of doing so can be found.

A new R2.6 billion project which forms part of the Working for Water Programme was recently launched by the South African Government. It aims to control invasive alien plants covering 1.2 million hectares over five years.

Barbara Creecy, Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries advises that, "Alien invasive species take over the natural functioning of ecosystems".

The Wilderness Foundation Africa is spearheading biodiversity tax incentives.

At present, the pilot species are lion and rhino, however, this could be extended to other species.

All it requires is a little bit of imagination and will.

Everyone in a community needs to actively participate in building lives of dignity for all, including the victims themselves.

God helps those who help themselves.

*"We all need each other."*

*Athi Ndwebi, Community Leader of Rasta camp, Sir Lowry's Pass Village.*