

Conference adopts a Proactive approach to Disaster management.

Whilst the Garden Route still attempts to recover from the devastating effects of the severe weather during August, a conference in Mossel Bay has been examining ideas to alert and prepare communities countywide for similar occurrences in the future. At the meeting in Hartenbos last Wednesday delegates at the annual conference of the Disaster Management Institution of Southern Africa debated how to improve forecasting of extreme weather conditions likely to cause damage and loss of life as well as ways and means of communicating this to Emergency Services and the public in time for them to prepare for the outcome.

Under the blanket theme of **Disaster Risk Reduction 2006** delegates from around South Africa attended as well as representatives from neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Botswana. As South African Weather Service Senior Manager – Forecasting Mnikeli Ndabambi explained, communicating the information beforehand is as important as speeding up the reaction process. “Our higher purpose” he said “is to save lives and property and it is a sobering thought that developing communities are far more susceptible to severe or high impact weather than developed ones.” He explained that SAWS is affiliated to the World Meteorological Organisation (a United Nations agency) and the WMO has determined that between 80 and 90% of natural disasters are weather related. These can include floods, droughts, windstorms, severe storms and extreme temperatures.

“We are constantly upgrading our instrumentation, analysis and detection equipment” said Ndabambi “so that our forecasts are of higher quality and available sooner. We are researching methods of improved hail detection, an integrated rainfall information system and flash flood warnings.”

One of the objectives of the conference was to identify means of integrating the media more closely in the warning process. “We have, regrettably, been very good at communicating the scale of the disaster after the event but now we need to focus on means of forewarning the affected areas in a timely way so as to allow them preparation time. In this respect improvements to integration of the media in the process are crucial – and particularly in the case of underprivileged communities, the use of radio media.”

Ndabambi concluded by saying that perhaps the use of complex and over technical language to explain weather conditions to the public in the past had contributed to a tardy reaction. “ We recognise this and, if we see a dangerous weather condition developing, will, in the future, try to make both the Emergency Services and the public sit up and take notice by using terms which are both explicit and forceful.”