



## The right thing to do and the hard thing to do are usually the same thing



The devastation caused by severe flooding in KwaZulu-Natal in April 2022 caused untold hardship. More than 450 people lost their lives, thousands were displaced, losing their homes, and their dignity as the flood waters destroyed houses, washed away roads, and triggered mudslides in densely populated areas. The economic impact on the region and the country is yet to be tallied, but the pictures of homes and businesses destroyed or damaged by the raging waters tells the story. In a period of just 24 hours, spanning 11 to 12 April 2022, Virginia Airport (10 km northeast of Durban) recorded 304 mm of precipitation. Along the coast 450 millimetres was recorded over the two days.

The deluge followed days of high rainfall, leading to a disaster that not only devastated the communities in the province but also impacted the national grid's capacity. Eskom's already fragile generation capacity was directly and indirectly affected. A hydroelectric dam operated by Eskom was overwhelmed by rising waters, rendering it inoperable. Eskom CEO Andre de Ruyter announced on 12 April that rolling blackouts would occur due to issues in the network caused by the excessive rains. At the Drakensberg Pumped Storage Scheme, debris on grids protecting the turbines needed clearing and on the Ingula Pumped Storage Scheme, both the upper and lower dam were at full capacity, and emptying the upper dam could have resulted in more flooding.

The impact of the storm caused many more ripple effects. Transnet, for example, was forced to suspend port operations in Durban. The heavy rains damaged roads leading into the port and the city. Shipping into the port was suspended and freight transport companies were told not to send cargo to Durban.

The floods in KwaZulu-Natal show clearly how an extreme weather event can have an impact through ripple effects on a much broader scale. Perhaps extreme weather events will not happen where you live, but the indirect impact will be felt by all. Thus, while the severe rainfall recorded in KwaZulu-Natal is in line with the levels of precipitation expected during a tropical cyclone, the frequency of such events will increase as climate change shifts weather patterns. The storm may not be directly attributed to climate change, but one can only imagine the impact if these types of storms occur more often.

With so many pressing issues, locally and globally, a mission-oriented approach is required. We must be mission-driven to tackle grand challenges. The most recent UN climate change report laid out in devastating detail the past, present, and future impacts of climate change on people and the planet they depend on. In April 2022, the people of KwaZulu-Natal experienced the impact of extreme weather in a devastating tragedy. Scientists now consider it unequivocal that humans are responsible for this accelerating climatic upheaval. One hardly hears climate-sceptic commentary any more, but there is still a significant 'delay discourse' advocated by many. We recognize that climate change is a reality and that it is of human origin, but everyone seeks to justify minimal action or no action in the interest

## President's Corner *(Continued)*

of a 'just transition'. Our focus should be on tackling these challenges through a grand scheme of change – a mission – because just as we have come to accept global warming on the scientific evidence, there is no doubt that a well-managed transformation is needed to ensure socio-economic stability. If we all do not have food, water, and housing security, the economy cannot thrive – we cannot thrive. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report focuses on how we might get ourselves out of the mess we have created, and the message is clear – we need transformation at a large scale in all major systems: energy, transport, infrastructure, buildings, agriculture, and food. How we build our cities, how we provide energy, how we travel – all these things require grand missions to address.

The floods in KwaZulu-Natal also highlighted the weaknesses in local stormwater infrastructure and urban development, and even the impact of plastic pollution on stormwater systems as plastic waste blocked drains and waterways. This tragic event should be seen as an opportunity to make the right choices going forward. We are at a crossroads and, depending on the decisions taken, we can contribute to making the impact of climate change worse or we can contribute towards the mission of addressing the grand challenge.

We can only hope that the tragedy triggers an important conversation about how we are preparing for the impact of climate change in general. The damage in KwaZulu-Natal was exacerbated due to the lack of proper infrastructure development and maintenance and haphazard and desperate urbanization through informal and semi-informal housing built on flood-prone land. As pointed out by President Cyril Ramaphosa, the disaster has national implications and other parts of the country are just as vulnerable to severe weather. The President established the Presidential Climate Commission in December 2020, made up of all stakeholders, including businesses. The Commission was tasked with ensuring that the so-called 'just transition' from our fossil-fuel-based economy to a greener future is managed effectively. However, the flood disaster highlights the fact that we need to also apply ourselves urgently to the challenges that climate change presents to the economy – from agriculture to manufacturing – and that we need to accelerate and implement real change now. We all should support the fossil fuel transition to ensure we mitigate global climate change, but we also must be realistic about the fact that climate change is already materially threatening our lives and livelihoods. The message from the UN is that it is never too late to start the transition to a green economy, but we cannot expect a free ride, especially if we continue to delay for another 10, 20, or 30 years.

'It is never too late to be what you might have been.' - George Eliot.

**I.J. Geldenhuys**  
*President, SAIMM*