PRESENTATION 2

The long-term psychological impacts of the Jagersfontein disaster

It has been exactly 4 years since the Jagersfontein tailings catastrophe that led to the release of 6 million cubic meters of toxic sludge, leading in the destruction of over 200 homes, valuable assets and the death of 4 lives with 1 person still missing. Today we continue to stand in solidarity to honour the memories of Ntate Aaron Moseu, Shadrack Williams, Msokoli Khuthu, Katleho Solly Olifant and Mme Mantele Mokhali. Mme Mokhali was tragically ripped away from her son's grasp on that terrifying morning and remains missing to this day, presumed unalive. This catastrophe has left deep unhealed emotional wounds, severe psychological trauma, and immense frustration across the entire town, affecting everyone who calls this area home.

The emotional weight carried by the families of the victims remains unbearable, passing from a collective memory into an everyday heavy burden. In an emotional interview with SABC News, Ishmael Mokhali shared his profound trauma, explaining how he is still heartbroken after watching his mother slip from his hands into the fast-moving toxic sludge. Her husband, Paseka Mokhali, expressed that while the family received initial counselling, it was not nearly enough to ease their daily pain, anxiety, and frustration. Because her remains have never been recovered, the family is stuck in a painful state of unresolved grief and ambiguous loss, unable to find closure, hold traditional ceremonies, or give her a proper burial. The psychological damage is so severe that Paseka has openly stated he does not want to be interviewed on the matter again, as recounting the details forces him to relive the daunting day his wife was swept away, illustrating how conversational reminders can re-traumatize victims.

This deep emotional distress extends from the parents directly to the youngest members of the community, altering the environment where local children grow up, play, and learn. Recent interviews with local educators reveal a troubling, long-term shift in student behaviour. The deputy principal of Boaramelo Combined School noted that children's behaviour

has changed significantly since the disaster occurred. While some students are visibly struggling with their studies and classroom concentration, the psychological impact is most visible in their home situations. Sensing the ongoing grief, financial stress, and hopelessness of the adults around them has stripped these children of their general peace of mind, proving that the trauma of that day continues to disrupt the foundational family structure and steal the innocence of the younger generation. The threat to the community's way of life is further complicated by the ongoing struggle for economic justice, which serves as a constant reminder of what was lost.

Residents like Xoliswa Mtyingizane, who is the sole guardian to four of her younger cousins, recall arriving at the local community hall with nothing, but tattered clothing and their entire lives lost to the sludge. While Xoliswa and other displaced residents have since been provided with newly built houses, they have still not been compensated for the valuable personal assets, furniture, and belongings they lost inside their original homes. Xoliswa is unfortunately one of many residents left empty handed despite endless promises from the mine's management. Billy Bilankulu, the development mine spokesperson, has gone completely silent and has not been heard from since 2023, when he promised that gradual restitution would take place, adding an agonizing layer of institutional betrayal to their existing grief.

This lack of compensation is severely worsened by a slow legal system that denies the community a sense of finality and peace. Four years after the disaster, the court case to hold the responsible parties accountable is still dragging on in endless procedural loops, and the alleged culprits have not been apprehended or held legally responsible. With the court date now being postponed all the way to September 2026, the delay makes people lose faith in their government, local leaders, and the justice system. Not getting timely justice acts as a heavy barrier that stops people from grieving properly, keeping the event raw, painful, and highly sensitive.

According to Judith Thomo, a prominent activist and community leader, this collective trauma shows up vividly in the daily lives of older adults who live in constant fear of another failure. Because the disaster happened so

suddenly without warning, everyday sounds now cause instant panic; older residents frequently get frightened by the faintest noises, like the loud whooshing sound of a boiling kettle, mistakenly thinking the dam is bursting again. Judith's close connection to these struggles highlights that activists are not separate from the community; they are deeply embedded within it and carry the exact same emotional wounds.

In the immediate aftermath, the Department of Social Development deployed 12 social workers to provide urgent psychosocial services, with additional support from the clergy of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference. However, there have been no follow-up visits to check on the community's progress, which defeats the true purpose of psychological aid, which must be sustained to be effective.

Which bring us to our second point, ultimately no one is exempt from mental strain, and Activists are no exception when it comes to mental health, they are in fact highly prone and susceptible. They face constant persecution, they are ostracised, labelled as whistleblowers, and often discredited to the point where members within their own organisations are pinned against them. They face bribery, threats, and are forced to maintain immense discipline and mental willpower to stay committed to the cause. This places tremendous psychological strain on them, and these problems often go beyond the workplace, spilling over into their personal lives. It is common for activists to neglect their own well-being to put forward the health of those they are fighting for, forgetting that they too are individuals and that the cause, while bigger than them, should not cost them their own health.

I spoke to some of my colleagues at CSOs 4 Tailings Justice and their stories are daunting to say the least. Sisi Phindi Ngobeni shared her experience of being incarcerated for four years. This happened after she blew the whistle on child trafficking in her community, where she says a member of her community was kidnapping children and harvesting their organs. Unfortunately, it is the tale as old as time that only the rich and influential get justice. She says because the perpetrator had relations with esteemed individuals, she was the one who ended up arrested. She tried appealing countless times but says she was badly advised to admit to the

crime. You can find her full life story in her upcoming book, Life After Prison.

She is unfortunately one of many of us with such horrifying stories, which brings me to my next point: mental health is important. With that, I want to say that if anyone requires psychological aid, there are pro bono services offered by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, SADAG, at 0800 456 789 for general mental health, or 0800 567 567 for the suicide crisis line. You can also SMS 31392 for a callback. Lifeline South Africa is also available 24 hours a day at 0861 322 322 or via WhatsApp at 060 715 4415, while local primary care clinics continue to offer low-cost or free basic counselling and medication. We must remember that healing is not a luxury, but a human right.