

New ways to deal with Cape Town's flooded communities

Addressing life's challenges in Cape Town's flooded shacks calls for communities and the municipality to work together, research from the African Centre for Cities has found. Gina Ziervogel and Leonie Joubert.



Courtesy African Centre for Cities/University of Cape Town

The Cape Flats is a low-lying coastal zone outside Cape Town, South Africa. While the state used to force people of colour to settle there under the apartheid regime, the area now attracts migrants from both South Africa and further afield. Tens of thousands live in cramped conditions, in low-cost formally registered houses or rickety squatter camps.

During the dry summer months, many places here look perfect for settlement. People buy a shack on the informal housing market, or build on an open piece of land. But when the winter rains come to this natural wetland, the high water table seeps up, pooling in and around houses where it will stagnate for days. Even in the formally housed areas, where the wetland has been tarred over and cemented in, stormwater drains back up: debris and household waste then flood the streets and nearby homes and businesses.

FLOODING AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

For business owner Christina Mtanda in the informal settlement of Philippi, regular flooding means that water pools in the kitchen of her

small restaurant. "I have even been shocked from the deep fryer I'm using, because we are standing in water," she says. She wears rubber boots and thick socks to keep dry, warm, and safe.

Others, like Bomkazi Sokhaya, live with sewage-tainted water seeping into their homes. The municipality's portable toilets aren't emptied regularly, leaving many residents to use buckets as toilets, which they empty into the standing water near Sokhaya's home.

The Cape Flats' challenges won't simply go away. Climate change is leading to more severe and heavier rains that increase the risk of floods. At the same time, budget constraints have slowed construction of new state-supplied housing, and the provision of sanitation and waste removal services. Vandalism of existing services sets progress back further. Many city efforts to upgrade the infrastructure – such as public toilets and improved sanitation and stormwater drains – have failed because communities weren't consulted or involved in the efforts.

We have a good idea about why people settle in flood-prone areas on the Cape Flats. The implications for people living here are also well documented. What isn't well understood, though, is how

governance aids or hinders management of and responses to flooding in these communities.

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) African Centre for Cities and partner departments studied the governance of flood risk on the Cape Flats. This included exploring how local government departments in the metropole view and respond to flood risk differently as well as how communities and the municipality can work together to address flooding.

The project was funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre and the UK Department for International Development through the Climate Change Adaptation in Africa programme. A number of Honours, Masters and PhD students worked on the project.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS UNDER PRESSURE

The research showed that there needs to be better collaboration between different sectors. That includes the different local government departments, civil society organisations – which may help with food and blanket distribution during a flood event – and volunteer leaders from within the communities themselves.

The work of one of the PhD students, from UCT's Centre of Criminology, highlights the difficulties of community-level governance. Communities are often represented by committees, whose members are drawn from voluntary activists. Their role is to address issues such as safety and neighbourhood development, and to negotiate with external actors such as local government, ward councillors, and civil society organisations.

The expectations of these volunteer committee members can be unrealistically high, she says. Their community expects them to sway local authorities' decision-making processes. Meanwhile local authorities expect them to rally the community together at workshops and meetings. In many cases, these community leaders don't wield nearly as much influence as they're expected to.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO BETTER GOVERNANCE

Often, when municipalities respond to converging threats and stresses, such as those discussed here, they tend to do so by seeking

out highly engineered technical solutions, or through policy response. But, as our research points out, if the governance context that acknowledges different interests and ways of operating is ignored, those other solutions will fail.

One of the key findings at the end of the project is the need for strengthened cooperation between local communities, civil society organisations, and the municipality. Significant progress has been made in Cape Town through the establishment of the Flood and Storms task team that coordinates government departments in preparing for and responding to flood risk. But this government-led task team does not provide space for the representation of groups from outside government.

The last phase of the project focused on bringing together these different stakeholder groups through facilitated dialogue. What emerged is that there are many groups who could benefit from collaborating more but it is a tricky field to negotiate. In cities like Cape Town, where informality is high and many people are disempowered in decision-making processes, it is essential to create a bridge between the formal and informal parts of the city's governance system. This is easier said than done. But aiming for collaborative governance is an important starting point, one that most stakeholders are willing to give a try.

One of the recommendations researchers gave to guide the city's work with communities, was to ensure transparency and report back to communities to avoid suspicions that could lead to conflict.

Results to date are promising. The municipality has indicated it is willing to foster collaboration across its departments, and to work with communities and civil society organisations. It is looking for solutions to flood risk and carrying on education campaigns. It's also trying to buy privately-owned land so it can develop new housing areas. And it's prioritising at-risk areas for appropriate flood risk reduction measures. ◻



Living in wet conditions are particularly hard on elderly, the infirm and on children.

Courtesy African Centre for Cities/University of Cape Town



This drain is part of a stormwater management system, put there to siphon off the water that fetches up in a 'detention pond', a manmade wetland built to hold water temporarily after heavy downpours. But, since the pond stands dry during summer, desperate people set up their homes on what seemed like suitable open ground, often not knowing what the winter months would bring.

Courtesy African Centre for Cities/University of Cape Town