



The Department of Water and Sanitation said it was heartbreaking to see the loss of precious lives and property, but most of these disasters are of our own making, through disregarding the warnings and authorities. File Picture: SAPA stringer

Department of Water and Sanitation calls for people to refrain from building houses near rivers – says water must be respected

By Opinion  Jan 16, 2022



KHULEKANI NGCOBO

HOW often do you stop and think about water on a daily basis?

The answer is: probably not that often. It is something we undoubtedly take for granted.

Considering water is an essential part of human life, we hardly give it the attention it deserves.

While we are happy that the rains now falling in some parts of the country have brought some important relief, our celebrations are cut short due to water-related disasters associated with the rain.

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It is heartbreaking to see the loss of precious lives and property but most of these disasters are of our own making, through disregarding the warnings of authorities.

Hundreds of families have been left destitute and homeless following heavy storms in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal and parts of the Eastern Cape during the festive season.

Flooding is the most destructive weather disaster. It causes power outages, damages infrastructure and can be deadly. A growing number of communities — both coastal and inland — are finding themselves underwater.

Therefore, during disruptive rains, warnings are issued advising people to avoid crossing raging rivers and streams and also those in low-lying areas to take refuge in higher places.

One of the most dangerous things people do is to build along flood lines and riverbanks. But the question remains, why are we continuing to build more homes in high-risk flood areas?

As a dry and water-scarce country that experiences drought now and then, people often build on these flood lines when the rivers and streams run dry, putting their lives at risk. We need to rethink where and how we build homes, giving more powers to environmental watchdogs to keep our communities in check and invest more in preventing floods from happening.

The impact on residents of Pietermaritzburg and some parts of the Eastern Cape is huge, yet people have few resources to cope. They are also the most vulnerable: often

unemployed, living in shacks, and with nowhere else to settle but where the water gathers when it rains.

These communities will also bear the brunt of the likely increase in flood events as climate change makes the heavy rains more severe and frequent.

The truth is, we know that the situation is only going to get worse because of the climate change emergency.

We cannot avoid the underlying reasons for why these communities find themselves in such vulnerable circumstances or the fact that flooding-related, humanitarian crises will continue to plague these communities.

People settle in high-risk areas for myriad and complex reasons. Often, they are responding logically and practically in situations where they have few options.

It is critical to find sustainable, workable flooding responses, now. This means involving communities in flood-prone settlements in decision-making processes. Authorities, councillors and traditional leaders must also play an active role in ensuring that people do not build on the river banks and flood lines.

It's for this reason that the Department of Water and Sanitation has a component specifically responsible for flood management governance to assess the likelihood of flooding incidents every year ahead of the high-flow season in order to develop and implement measures to mitigate the adverse effects.

The department adopted a hybrid approach to flood management, consisting of a combination of structural and non-structural methods to manage floods. Some existing water infrastructure, such as the Vaal Dam, have gated spillways and built-in flood retention capacity.

This combination makes it possible to attenuate or capture peak flood volumes or to pre-emptively release reservoirs rapidly. Effective flood control using these structures is achievable only through early flood-peak detection, prediction and warning.

The main objectives of flood management are to ensure the safety of human lives, to minimise the damage to properties and to ensure that dams are 100% full.

Water is the most important resource in the world as it is the source of life and has no substitute. Water can also be deadly if we do not respect it and are irresponsible so let us be responsible and be always cautious around water resources, especially on rainy days when water levels increase and the speed of flow increases.

Khulekani Ngcobo is a Senior Communicator at the Department of Water and Sanitation.

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