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Let us refrain from building houses near rivers where disaster is inevitable

HOW often do you stop and think about water on a daily basis? The answer is: probably not that often.

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

While we are happy that the rains now falling over parts of the country have brought much-needed relief, our celebrations are cut short due to associated water-related disasters.

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

Hundreds of families have been left homeless following heavy storms in Pietermaritzburg and parts of the Eastern Cape over the festive season.

It is a fact that flooding is one of the most destructive natural hazards.

Flooding causes power outages, damage to infrastructure, and can be deadly. A growing number of communities, both coastal and inland, find themselves under water.

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

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

Ours is a water-scarce country which experiences drought. Rivers and streams run dry, and people build on the flood lines, putting their lives at risk.

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Issues at Stake

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The impact on affected Pietermaritzburg residents 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.

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

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 flood-prone communities in decision-making processes.

Authorities, councillors and

traditional leaders must play an active role in ensuring people do not build in high-risk areas.

It's for this reason that the Department of Water and Sanitation has a component specifically responsible for flood management governance, which assesses the likelihood of flooding every year ahead of the high-flow season, to develop and implement mitigating measures.

The department adopted a hybrid approach to flood management, consisting of a combination of structural and non-structural methods.

Some existing water infrastructure, such as the Vaal Dam, have gated spillways and built-in flood retention capacity.

This makes it possible to attenuate or capture peak flood volumes, or to preemptively 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 safety of human lives, minimise damage to properties, and to ensure dams are 100% full.

Water is the most important resource in the world as it is the source of life and has no substitute.

But water can also be deadly if we do not respect it and are irresponsible. So let us always be cautious around water resources, especially on rainy days when water levels and speed of flow increase.

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