

“Sometimes I think the shack was better”: Examining flood-risk in subsidised housing areas in Cape Town.

Flooding is an ongoing challenge in Cape Town. The problem is considered most severe on the Cape Flats, where thousands of poor households are affected by seasonal flooding each year. Informal settlements are perceived to be most vulnerable. The authorities, the research community and those living in flood-prone informal settlements view the provision of state-subsidised housing as the definitive, long-term solution to flooding on the Cape Flats. This relationship between housing and risk reduction rests on the pervasive, but entirely untested, assumption that flooding is confined to informal settlements. However, the combination of well-documented quality concerns and the geographical and social marginality of developments makes a strong case for flooding in subsidised housing areas.

This thesis examines the extent, nature and impact of flooding in informal and subsidised housing areas on the Cape Flats. Drawing on constructivist arguments regarding the subjectivity of risk as a concept, I examine how flooding and risk are conceptualised locally and internationally, and how well these framings compare with people’s experiences in subsidised housing areas in Cape Town. I show that flooding remains a significant challenge in subsidised housing areas. Flood-risk has a strong built environment component; the very dwellings that should help to improve people’s lives serve instead to transform and perpetuate risk, undermining the developmental objectives of the housing programme. In so doing, I interrogate assumptions about risk, hazard and vulnerability, and the lessons for theory and practice.

For full thesis please contact Mujahid Gabier at mujahidg@sun.ac.za