

FLOOD RESILIENCE IN AFRICAN COASTAL CITIES:

Insights from INACCT Resilience Literature Review



1. SUMMARY

This insight brief summarises key findings from a literature review under the Designing Inclusive African Coastal City Resilience (INACCT Resilience) project, exploring flood resilience interventions in African coastal cities, particularly informal settlements. It reveals that effective flood resilience is not merely a technical or infrastructural issue, but is deeply intertwined with socio-political contexts, governance, and the realities of life in African cities' informal settlements. Based on emerging insights, the review underscores the need to move away from prevailing top-down, technocratic approaches toward more collaborative and inclusive processes that incorporate local innovations and community insights for sustainable flood resilience.

2. INTRODUCTION

The INACCT Resilience project works to strengthen proactive, inclusive, and gender-responsive resilient municipal planning and action in Beira, Mozambique and eThekweni (Durban), South Africa. INACCT's particular focus is on flooding in informal settlements, where residents face multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities such as poor housing conditions, economic constraints, insecure land tenure, and inadequate service delivery. These factors combine to heighten the exposure and vulnerability of informal settlement residents to flooding and other climate hazards. The project bridges technical, local, and traditional knowledge systems to enhance long-term resilience in informal settlements, with scalable learnings for diverse African cities.

The review adopted a political ecology lens to explore flood resilience interventions in informal settlements in African coastal cities, emphasising that the impacts of climate hazards are inseparable from their socio-political and economic contexts. The political ecology perspective interrogates the intersection of environmental change, power, and inequality, highlighting the role of governance approaches, cultural influences, power dynamics and other contextual factors which influence climate change resilience efforts. Particular attention was given to issues of equity, inclusivity, and justice.

1. The review is an analysis of free and open source resources and, while including fee-based articles may have revealed additional insights, this approach reflects the type of knowledge that many stakeholders across African cities would have access to.

The review focused on identifying best practices, gaps, and opportunities for strengthening interventions which take place before, during, and after floods to enhance resilience in informal settlements facing escalating climate risks. Emerging insights will inform INACCT's pilot actions, such as its city-to-city learning exchanges, to share and scale lessons on how to effectively and inclusively enhance flood resilience in informal settlements. Key findings, lessons, gaps and opportunities are outlined in this brief.

3. METHODOLOGY

The review adopted a scoping approach to identify emerging themes and gaps in the existing field of research. The process was not designed to be exhaustive but rather to select and analyse key pieces of research which related directly to the project's research questions. Based on strategic keyword search parameters, sources were accessed through Google Scholar and supplemented by a selection of unpublished sources under the broader INACCT project.¹

Insights were recorded according to the key research questions guiding the review:

- What happened (i.e. the hazard event and its consequences)
- What level of environmental/ climate change awareness exists?
- What was the response (short, medium or long-term)? And how effective was this in terms of impact and sustainability?
- Who responded? And in what way?
- How did context affect the impacts and responses?
- What can we understand about actors and governance arrangements that affected how the hazard was experienced and responded to?
- Are there any insights related to gender or other aspects of inclusivity?
- Are any insights offered on how things could be done differently and improved in future?

This data was collated and synthesised into an Excel sheet, documenting intervention timing (pre-, during-, or post-flood), location, lead implementers, as well as the relative success of each intervention (“largely unsuccessful”, “moderately successful”, and “mostly successful – based on the analysis of the sources’ authors).

Thereafter, a comprehensive review document was developed, analysing emerging themes and insights through a political ecology lens.

4. RESULTS OVERVIEW

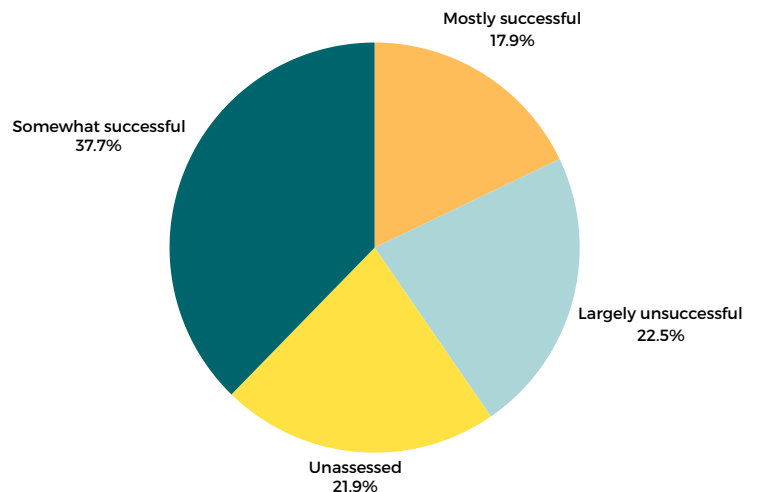
The results highlight a strong bias toward documentation of pre-flood interventions, with relatively few examples of measures taken during or after floods. Broadly, the flood resilience interventions identified across pre-, during-, and post- flood phases, irrespective of lead implementer or success, were as follows:

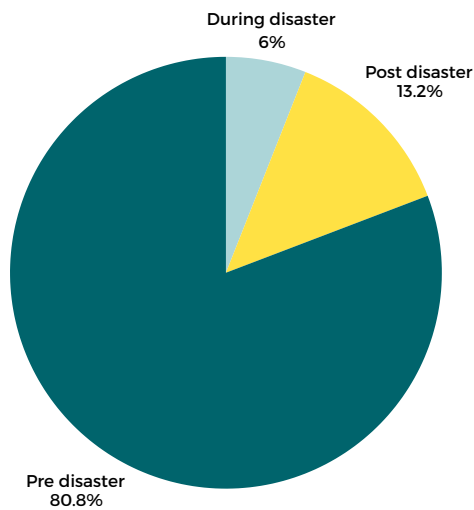
Pre-flood event	During-flood event	Post-flood event
Early warning systems	Evacuation and temporary relocation	Repair and reconstruction
Structural interventions	Rescue logistics	Medical/health
Ecosystem-based flood interventions/green infrastructure	Water treatment and other health-related actions	Relocation
Voluntary relocation, eviction, spatial planning, and regulatory approaches	Other actions	Livelihoods, employment, and daily routines
Livelihood activities		Sources of assistance

Figure 1. Efficacy of flood resilience interventions was skewed towards “somewhat successful”, with “largely unsuccessful” and “unassessed” interventions being almost equally represented. “Mostly successful” was the least represented category. Efficacy of interventions was determined based on the inputs of the source’s authors and are therefore subject to their respective perspectives and biases. Generally speaking, successful interventions were associated with collaborative, locally-led planning and implementation while unsuccessful interventions were not designed to be context-specific nor responsive to the needs of the most climate vulnerable groups.



Community members discussing resilience opportunities in their informal settlement.





Graph 2. More than three quarters of assessed interventions took place prior to disaster. This could be related to bias in research and documentation of pre-disaster interventions, the framing of search selection criteria, a higher propensity for disaster preparedness among implementers or a combination of these factors. Nevertheless, this highlights a key gap in the literature and a need for increased assessment and documentation of during and post-disaster interventions.

Graph 3. Citizens (including individual, household, and community groups) made up the largest proportion of intervention implementers, playing a leading role particularly in low-resource settings. Partnerships or “multiple actors” accounted for the second largest group, and were particularly effective when the approach was inclusive and well-resourced. National and city government interventions collectively accounted for the third largest group, but were often constrained by finance, political priorities, or reluctance to invest in informal areas. NGO-led interventions were the smallest group, however they were commonly featured in the “multiple actor” category. This implies that NGO-led interventions were more likely to be implemented within a partnership framework, rather than in isolation.

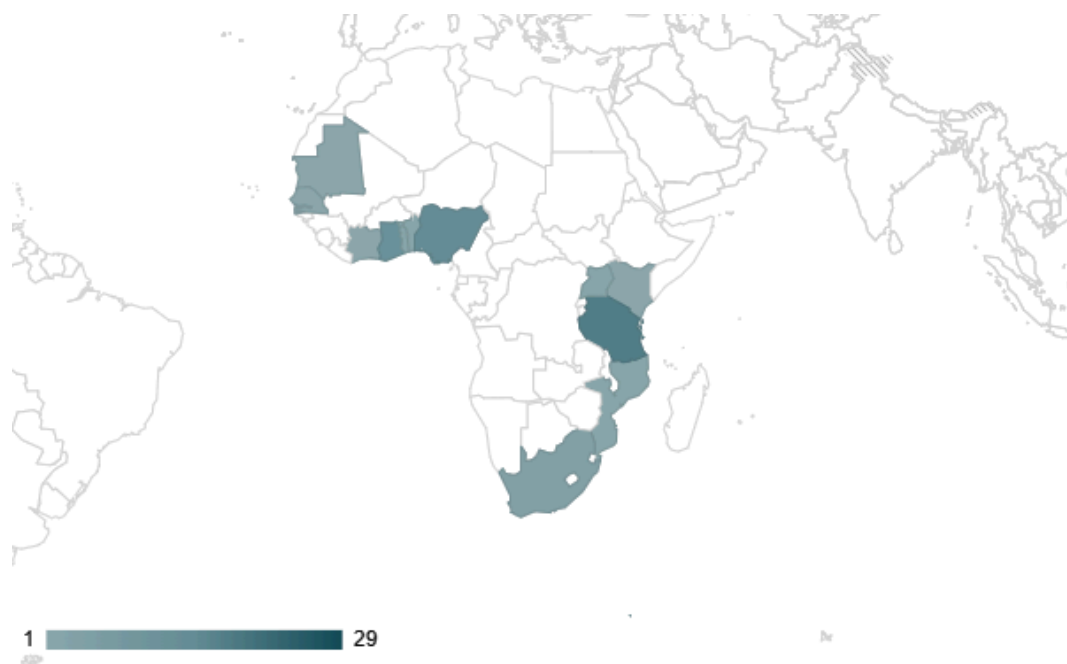
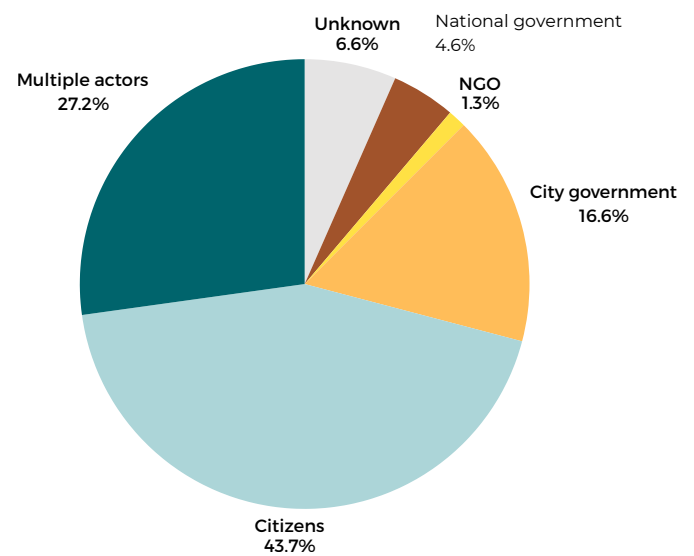


Figure 2. This map shows where interventions assessed in this review took place, with Tanzania being the most well represented country followed by Ghana and Nigeria. As evidenced in the Figure, many African coastal countries are not represented in this study. (Source: Author's own)

5. KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS

5.1 The challenge of top-down activities which resist informality

While definitions and ways of classifying informality vary, it is believed that over half of African city dwellers live in informal settlements which are recognised as areas of compounded vulnerability (Boanada-Fuchs et al., 2024). Often situated in precarious locations with heightened exposure to climate hazards, their vulnerability is compounded by other factors such as limited financial resources, poor service delivery and inadequate housing conditions. Flood risk is not merely a biophysical event but is deeply embedded within socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts. The review reveals a fundamental tension regarding dominant institutional perceptions of informality, stemming from colonial ideals which sought to advance the establishment of formal cities, perceiving order as being synonymous with modernity (Olajide, 2025).

Today, many governments and other stakeholders still view informal settlements as undesirable, temporary, and illegal, leading to a reluctance to invest in long-term flood resilience interventions - particularly infrastructure (Satterthwaite et al., 2020). Similarly, governments may not prioritise service provision mandates in informal settlements, although a lack of waste collection or inadequate sanitation facilities commonly lead to drainage blockages which ultimately intensify flood risk across wider areas. Instead, unfavourable perceptions of informality often result in top-down, punitive, and ultimately ineffective measures (Cobbinah, 2023). Emerging findings from the review illustrate that:

- **Eviction is not a solution, but a displacement of vulnerability.** Efforts to displace informal settlement residents from flood prone-areas, often framed as public safety measures, may also be interpreted as anti-informality initiatives (Roberts & Okanya, 2022). There are instances when occupied land cannot safely support communities however, eviction and displacement are often not adequately coupled with a resettlement plan and fundamentally fail to address the root cause of vulnerability. This approach results in psychological and emotional trauma, with many evicted communities returning to the land or resettling in similarly precarious locations due to socio-economic attachments or a lack of alternative options (Ofosu et al., 2023), as was observed in Accra, Ghana (Owusu & Obour, 2021).

- **In-situ upgrading (where possible) is a more sustainable and inclusive approach.** In contrast to forced relocations or evictions, in-situ upgrading presents a more just and sustainable approach to strengthening flood resilience in informal settlements. This can involve physical and spatial planning improvements (roads, drainage, water, sanitation, reblocking) and socio-economic interventions (savings groups, education, income generation). Drainage projects were among the most common interventions, ranging from ditches dug by citizens to large scale construction initiatives. Importantly, in-situ developments must be coupled with strong governance and management systems to prevent issues like siltation or garbage blockages which compromise sustainability and impact.

Case study: In Cape Town, the Informal Settlement Network (ISN) led a community-driven reblocking initiative to address flooding and fire risks in dense informal settlements. Unlike city-led efforts, residents co-designed spatial frameworks with officials and councillors. Activities included flood mapping, drainage works, and advocacy. The initiative improved municipal service access, emergency response, and flood governance, demonstrating successful collaborative resilience-building (Fox et al., 2021).

Lessons emerging from the review emphasise that working alongside the reality of informality is both a matter of social justice and one of effective, sustainable climate resilience. Mainstreaming the place-based insights and actions of informal settlement residents into municipal disaster management and urban development is critical for addressing the lived realities of Durban's most climate vulnerable population. Therefore, instead of viewing informality as a problem to be solved, INACCT approaches informality as a lens for facilitating the strengthening of gender-responsive and inclusive flood resilience in informal settlements in African cities.



5.2 The value of people-centred, multi-stakeholder collaborative interventions

Citizens were the largest group of flood resilience intervention implementers, accounting for 43.7% of all recorded actions within the scope of the review. Livelihood activities and strong social networks play a critical role in both pre-flood preparedness and post-flood recovery. Case studies from various African cities show that extensive financial and physical help during recovery often comes from well-bonded social networks, demonstrating that social capital is a key asset in disaster management. This highlights that those most exposed to floods are often the primary drivers of their own resilience.

Furthermore, insights highlighted the value of collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships, which accounted for 27.2% of all identified interventions. Findings highlighted that partnerships are essential to align institutional planning processes with on-the-ground actions being driven by communities.

There were also notable co-benefits associated with this category of interventions. Collaborative approaches were associated with strengthened alignment between institutional planning processes and on-the-ground community-driven actions, as well as enhanced collective buy-in and ownership – all of which improves the sustainability and impact of flood resilience interventions in urban African informal settlements.

Another core component of collaborative multi-stakeholder processes is the integration of Local and Indigenous Knowledge (LIK) into DRR planning and practice.

This is crucial for providing nuanced and contextually-grounded insights that can complement technical expertise, leading to tailored and actionable information (Obi et al., 2021). Some sources illustrated a connection between failing to include LIK and unsuccessful flooding adaptations. For example, in Delta State, Nigeria, statutory policy made inconsistent consideration of LIK and lived experience of flood prone communities, leading to interventions that did not effectively address flood risk. In contrast, several flood resilience measures that did integrate LIK were deployed by at-risk communities in the same area, with many having a success rate of 80% or higher (Obi et al., 2021).

The value of integrating LIK is particularly prevalent in the design and deployment of early warning systems.

Case study: The Developing Risk Awareness through Joint Action (DARAJA) project in Dar Es Salaam and Nairobi uses locally contextualised weather forecasts to collaboratively develop a tailored and impact-based early warning system (EWS). Co-designed by national meteorological offices, local community organisations and residents of urban informal settlements, the EWS offers actionable insights in an accessible and inclusive manner through SMS and notice board information dissemination. DARAJA's EWS currently reaches close to 1 million informal settlement residents across the two cities, enhancing local resilience by informing planning and preparedness for extreme climate events (Gajjar et al., 2021; World Habitat, 2024).



Thousands lost their homes during the Durban floods.

5.3 Nature-based solutions (NbS) offer valuable co-benefits

The review revealed that nature- or ecosystem-based solutions such as green infrastructure and vegetation restoration can significantly strengthen flood resilience by improving water retention and stabilising soil. These initiatives offer an array of co-benefits, including increased biodiversity, reduced energy use through shading and evapotranspiration, and new livelihood opportunities (see above section). The combination of climate resilience benefits alongside other NbS co-benefits allows for a more bottom-up and inclusive form of governance for climate resilience. Ultimately, nature-based flood interventions represent more than just a technical solution; they are a vehicle for inclusive resilience-building, where ecological restoration and socio-economic upliftment are intertwined. With institutional support and long-term commitment, NbS can play a transformative role in safeguarding Africa's coastal cities from the growing risks of climate-induced flooding.

Case study: The Transformative Riverine Management Programme (TRMP), building on the Sihlanzimvelo stream cleaning initiative in Durban, South Africa, focuses on restoring and protecting rivers through strong community involvement. Activities include stream cleaning, water quality monitoring, data collection, education, solid waste management, alien plant clearing, flood attenuation, and wetland restoration. By reducing litter and invasive species, the programme mitigates flood risks and infrastructure damage, enhancing climate resilience. Community cooperatives and Enviro-Champs play central roles, supported by NGOs and the Municipality. With its partnership-driven model, TRMP demonstrates how local engagement and ecosystem restoration can be scaled to create livelihood opportunities while strengthening river health and adaptive capacity against climate impacts

From a political ecological perspective, it is critical to ensure that NbS approaches pay particular attention to governance reforms to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities, recognising that this approach involves trade-offs and contestations over land, labour, and power. This is particularly relevant within the context of informal settlements, where access to land, tenure, and services are already constrained.

Resilient community members in Beira continue with day-to-day activities post flooding.



5.4 Disaggregated, Localised, and Up-to-Date Data is Critical

Disaggregated, localised, and up-to-date data is essential for strengthening flood resilience in informal settlements. This data is critical for accurate risk assessment, effective warning systems, and understanding community-specific vulnerabilities. The review highlights that while the direct threat of flooding is physical, the level of risk is ultimately determined by a community's capacity to anticipate, respond to, and recover from hazards – significantly informed and strengthened by the availability of robust datasets.

The role of data in early warning systems: Early warning systems (EWS) are a critical tool for flood resilience, but their effectiveness depends on significant meteorological and other data inputs, which, as reiterated by the review findings, remain limited across much of Africa. To overcome these limitations, the review emphasises the importance of data integration. Greater data sharing between diverse stakeholders, alongside the inclusion of local, traditional, and indigenous knowledge, can enhance the accuracy and trustworthiness of warnings. EWS which are co-developed and tailored to the needs and capacities of the end user are more likely to be acted upon, making them ultimately more impactful for strengthening flood response. A critical component of this is the accessibility of data and information communication. Within the scope of EWS interventions, data must be communicated in an actionable, accessible, and inclusive manner, encompassing considerations of general climate literacy, language, dissemination channels, and technological accessibility. Co-developing EWS that are tailored to context and consider the aforementioned factors helps to ensure that at-risk and marginalised groups receive timely information through appropriate technologies.

Case study: In addition to the DARAJA project, Durban's community-based forecast early warning systems (CBFEWS) successfully integrates scientific information and local knowledge. Community observations include the paths followed by rivers and streams during heavy rains, and how different rainfall and stream levels affected river levels in specific locations. By bridging these insights with technical data, the CBFEWS can more accurately predict flood impacts and estimate time lags between upstream rain and stream levels and downstream impacts. This helps to inform the type of response required, including possible evacuation in extreme events.

5.4.1 Gender, equality, and social inclusion:

This study revealed a significant gap in gender and otherwise segregated data regarding how gender and inclusion factor into flood vulnerability and impact in informal settlements. Evidence shows that flooding often exacerbates existing inequalities, yet few studies examine gender and other intersectional dynamics. As a result, comprehensive insights into how women and men are differentially impacted by climate hazards, particularly flooding, remain limited. Further research should examine the differentiated ways in which women, men and other marginalised groups - including people with disabilities, the elderly, and children - prepare for, experience, and recover from flooding. Practitioners implementing flood resilience solutions can contribute by collecting and disseminating gender-disaggregated data (e.g., qualitative analysis of differentiated and intersectional impacts of flooding) as part of their project monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Beyond addressing the gender data gap, flood resilience strategies must proactively include marginalised groups throughout the project or intervention lifecycle. Challenges such as unsafe temporary relocation shelters for women and girls illustrate the consequences of excluding vulnerable populations in the development of institutional disaster response measures. Adopting an intersectional approach, as is done under the INACCT project, encourages the examination of overlapping vulnerabilities that may reinforce or challenge marginalisation and climate risk (Brown et al., 2019). Including these groups not only improves project effectiveness but also ensures political visibility and agency for affected groups in disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation decision-making. These groups should be included throughout the project cycle—not merely consulted at the outset or the end, and granted political visibility within disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation decision-making processes.

The INACCT Resilience project aims to contribute to, build on, and share data on the successes and failures of gender-responsive and inclusive flooding interventions, with the aim of replicating successes and mitigating failures for improved flood resilience in informal settlements across African cities.



5.5 Limited technical and financial institutional capacity can undermine the effectiveness of flood resilience interventions

A highly prevalent issue identified throughout the literature reviewed was the financial and technical constraints faced by implementers of resilience measures in all sectors. Although informal settlements tend to have compounded vulnerabilities—including higher population densities, and a shortage of internal resources—constrained institutional financial and technical capacities limit government's ability to invest in potentially impactful flood resilience interventions (Fox et al., 2021). High cost measures to prevent flooding are more likely to target areas with higher property values as a result of the tax structures they support and the greater magnitude of political power of property owners in wealthier areas. Several of the flood resilience interventions identified such as drainage system construction or coastal defenses were deemed unsuccessful because their costs were prohibitively high, precluding them from being implemented at scale in the resource constrained context of many African cities.

Other costs that undermined efficacy were high maintenance costs that were not factored into infrastructure management plans. This notwithstanding, drainage systems were regularly cited as key tools for reducing flooding risk. As such, inadequate financing and the failure of financial flows to address the adaptation needs of African cities are major constraints. This gap can, in part, be addressed through public-private partnership models, and innovative climate financing structures. In order to address the multitude of overlapping factors which contribute to flood risk in informal settlements, it is critical to implement a combination of locally-led, low-cost innovations alongside more comprehensive capital intensive interventions for sustained and comprehensive flood resilience.

5.6 The vital role of community structures and networks of support

In the aftermath of disasters, the degree of support flood victims receive varies by context, and community structures and networks of support are oftentimes highly influential in shaping recovery. Larger cities are also more likely to host international aid organisations, benefiting from cooperation networks established prior to flooding and smoother flows of resources afterwards (Pasquini, 2019). Similarly, cities that are part of international networks, such as ICLEI, tend to access recovery resources more easily than those operating in isolation, as networks can raise city profiles within related agendas, thereby connecting them with funding opportunities (Pasquini, 2019; Anguelovski et al., 2014). Belonging to a network also builds institutional adaptive capacities by sharing awareness, knowledge, and skills. For example, ICLEI's Cities for Climate Protection Programme exposed several South African cities to adaptation initiatives and generated USAID support (Pasquini, 2019). Many African cities operate at low capacity, struggling to meet the needs of their citizens, particularly those in informal settlements. In such contexts, sharing of physical and knowledge-based resources through community and external networks is essential for resilience.

- **Family, friends, and community:** Social networks often provide the most immediate and significant support. In Aboabo, Ghana, extensive financial, emotional, material, and physical assistance came from strong community bonds rooted in a shared Muslim identity (Ofosu et al., 2023). This highlights both the importance of community structures in recovery and the vulnerability of areas where such networks are weak. Newer neighborhoods, with higher concentrations of recent migrants lacking local ties, may be particularly at risk.
- **Aid organisations:** External actors can extend these networks of support. In Dar es Salaam's Magomeni Suna settlement, the Red Cross had a far-reaching impact by mobilising logistics, equipment, and personnel to rescue households and provide food, shelter, and medication (John, 2020). This case illustrates how NGOs can step in to reinforce fragile local systems and fill institutional voids in flood resilience interventions.

6. CRITICAL RESEARCH GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This review highlights several critical gaps in the literature on flood resilience interventions in informal settlements in African coastal cities, alongside opportunities for future research.

- **Limited scholarship on issues of gender, equality, and social inclusion:** Despite gender being a central lens for understanding climate impacts, there is limited scholarship on gender-responsive approaches. The scarcity of gender-disaggregated data constrains analysis of how women are specifically impacted by flooding or benefit from resilience interventions. While some gender-related insights emerged, the lack of evidence restricts comprehensive understanding. Future research must address these gaps to ensure that interventions are equitable and inclusive.
- **Perceived efficacy vs. lived experience:** Success rankings in the review (“mostly successful,” “somewhat successful,” or “largely unsuccessful”) relied on evaluations from study authors rather than the communities themselves. This creates a disconnect between reported efficacy and lived experiences of intervention beneficiaries. Addressing this gap requires participatory research approaches, as INACCT is undertaking, to centre community perceptions of what constitutes meaningful success.
- **Temporal imbalance in intervention documentation:** The review revealed a strong skew toward “pre-flood” interventions (80.7%), with relatively few “during-flood” (6%) or “post-flood” (13.3%) interventions recorded. This imbalance may reflect both research bias and a genuine emphasis on preparedness by implementers. More work is needed to explore interventions across all phases of flooding to build a fuller picture of resilience dynamics.
- **Imbalanced representation of implementers:** Citizen-led interventions comprised 43.7% of cases, underscoring the agency of residents who often have no choice but to act given low service delivery and limited planning. While this provides valuable insights into grassroots resilience, there is limited representation of other actors. Only two NGO-led interventions were identified, and no solely private-sector interventions were documented. This prevents meaningful assessment of their roles and suggests both a research and implementation gap.

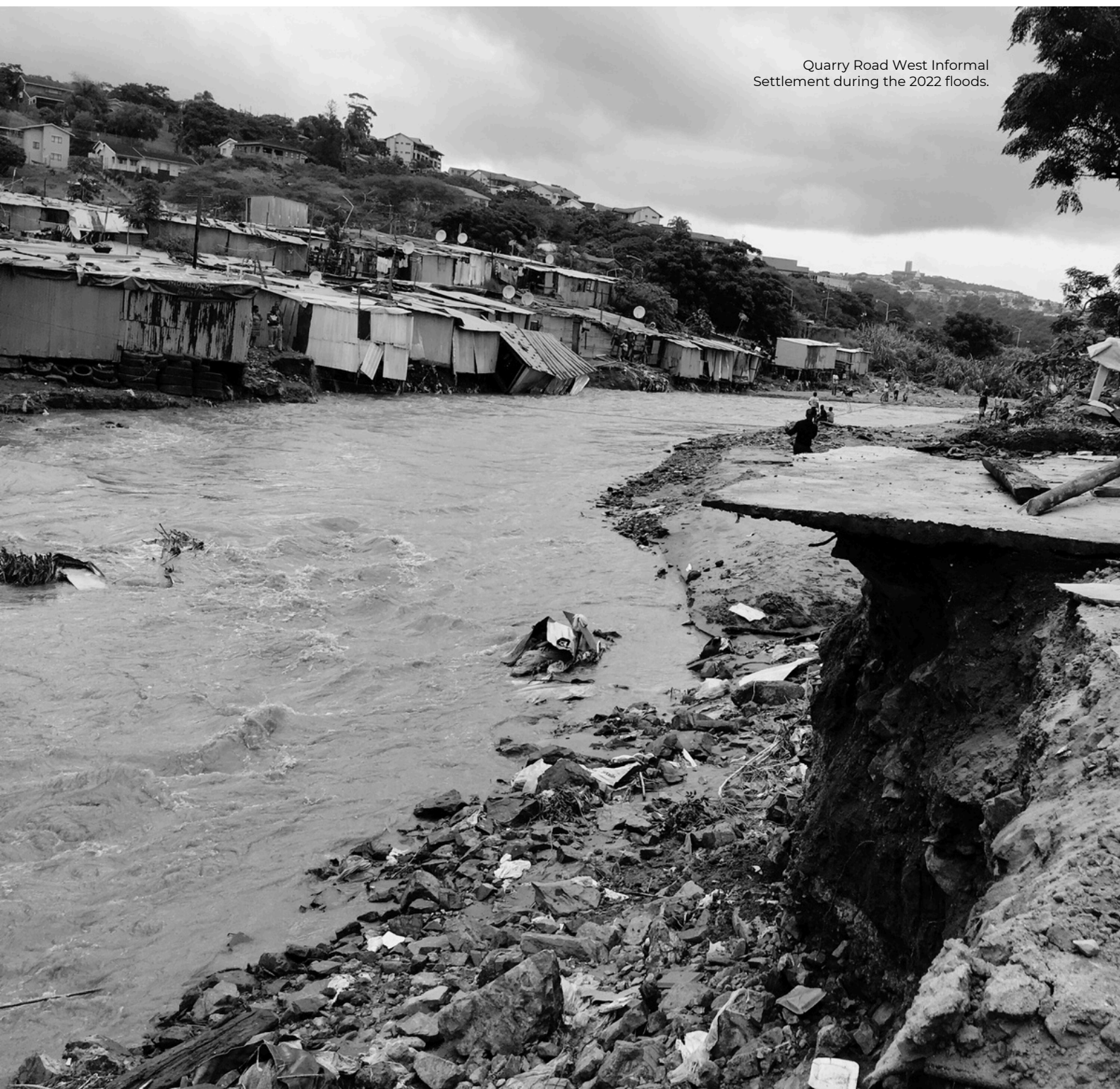
Together, these gaps highlight opportunities for future research to generate more inclusive, community-centred, and representative understandings of flood resilience.



People finding higher ground during Beira floods.

7. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE RESILIENCE

Flooding is a physical hazard, but resilience is social, political, and institutional. Building resilience in African coastal cities requires moving beyond infrastructure to inclusive governance that empowers communities as co-producers of solutions. A focus on everyday governance – the practices and rationales of unique actors – is essential for shaping flood resilience policies. The way forward requires a collaborative approach that embraces the reality of informality and empowers citizens, while strengthening the institutional frameworks that support them. This synthesis underscores that true resilience is built from the ground up, with communities at the center of a transformative process. Through INACCT, these insights are informing pilot interventions, learning exchanges, and capacity-building activities to advance inclusive and transformative resilience in Beira, Durban, and beyond.



Quarry Road West Informal Settlement during the 2022 floods.

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