

Improving resilience to devastating floods

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Joseph Cotterill, in [“Aid groups battle to reach cyclone survivors”](#) (March 21), describes the terrible devastation that recent floods have wreaked in Mozambique and neighbouring countries.

These floods are the latest in a sad and vicious cycle. Over the past 35 years, an average of about 20m people a year were displaced by floods worldwide. India, China and Bangladesh, saw the largest numbers of people displaced by floods, but many other countries suffered as well. For example, Idai was not the first flood to inundate Mozambique: a [similar disaster](#) hit the country in 2000. And the problem of flooding may worsen over time, as climate change and rising sea levels further increase the risk.

In [recent work](#) we find that when cities are hit by massive floods, economic activity dips, but typically recovers within a year. Even low elevation areas, which are afflicted much more often by devastating floods, recover relatively quickly.

This is in part good news, but unfortunately it also means that the same areas will often be vulnerable to the next cycle of flooding after they are rebuilt. This means that not only will lives be lost again, but also health will be damaged, schooling will be interrupted, and people’s lives will be turned upside down.

So how can we make communities more resilient? A natural reference point when rebuilding after floods is to restore people’s homes to the state they were in previously. But locals and aid organisations that focus exclusively on this goal are setting up the next phase of the flooding cycle. To break this cycle we need to build differently.

For example, coastal floodplains are flat and attractive for developers who move on after completing the job, leaving residents vulnerable to the impact of floods. So we should, wherever possible, help people build on safer, higher ground. And where there are no practical alternatives to the coastal

floodplains, we should build taller: [buildings on stilts](#) are common in parts of Asia, and they mitigate the damage from flooding. It is true that building taller and safer comes at a price, but many poorer nations, including in Africa, are becoming richer. Planning for housing that breaks the cycle of flooding should be part of the process of development.

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