Flooding in Cape Town’s informal settlements: micro-politics and community leadership

Laura Drivdal,
PhD candidate, Center of Criminology,
University of Cape Town
1. June 2013
Context 1: South Africa and Cape Town

- SA does have pro-poor policies and housing legislation.

- Still – new informal settlements every year – many on private land

- Particular national political history – tension

- CT’s 3.7 mill people
  – Aprox. 400 000 live in inadequate dwellings – shacks in informal settlements
Context 2: The flooding problem in Cape Town’s informal settlements:

- Most informal settlements located in low laying area – the Cape Flats
- Flooding every winter:
- Natural factors - high water table
- But also lack of- or broken infrastructure (e.g. drains)
Flooding in informal settlements:

- When rain – flooding - water both inside and outside shacks
- Still standing grey-water
- Effects: health, mobility, belongings
Earlier project insights: towards analysing interaction

• In Cape Town, efforts made:
  • **Individuals**: residents apply coping mechanisms
  • **Local government**: ‘flood risk management plan’, relief aid, some upgrading

• However moving from coping to adaptation needs:
  • Better collaboration - interaction within settlements and between residents and local government
  • Insights into political dynamics that impact this interaction

• Flood risk management literature: household vulnerability or government policy
  • but lately also acknowledged political dynamics at several levels
Methods and focus

• **3 flood prone settlements visited for 3 years:**
  • Observation, interviews, surveys

• Focus:
  • **Community leaders:** ‘Intermediates’ in between local government and residents
  • This give insights into political dynamics
Varied expectations to community leaders:

- **Residents: often feel fatigue, want leaders to work for them**
  - Report flooding to government
  - Influence government - provide upgrading
  - However, difficult for leaders to reach local government

- **Local Government: want leaders to work downwards**
  - Inform and get residents to join workshops
    - difficult because residents feel information not useful, want upgrading
  - Regulate residents (e.g. waste in drains, relocate) –
    - difficult as residents suspicious to authorities
Micro-politics: flooding and broader informal settlement issues

• **Politics within settlements:**
  • Suspicion. e.g around handing out flood aid
  • Tension between residents and between leaders related to deeper issues
  • Leaders expected to work voluntarily, but they marginalized too sometimes quit, find paid employment, or even corruption

• **Outsiders also change political dynamics:**
  • Co-optation
  • Too many different outside actors
  • Fatigue or tension after heightened expectations
  • However, also change for the better possible – increase learning about political systems
Conclusion

• Improved interaction necessary, but **attention to political dynamics at all levels** important
  – Impacts community scale vulnerability

• Clarity about roles and communication channels – **increase transparency, decrease suspicion**

• Avoid different actors collaborating with different community leaders

• Constant **mediate expectations**, and explain bureaucratic processes and formal political systems
Thanks