

# Preparing for Rain: Flood Defences in Accra's Waterways

Afra Foli

Accra's rainy season is accompanied by floods every year, and so residents, especially those living by the waterways, anticipate overflow with significant anxiety. Warnings abound both in the news and in daily conversation, and people share memories of past flooding events. Citizens often seek to prevent disaster by taking matters into their own hands. They construct flood barriers using sandbags, cement, concrete and rubble left over after construction. In this article, I discuss the politics that arise around these interventions. As residents' fears mobilize this infrastructural response, it maps onto and shapes the spatial politics of the city's watercourses in ways that touch on affect, materiality and party rivalry.



### Self-constructed Flood Interventions

Accra's waterways are naturally occurring rivers and streams that primarily facilitate the runoff of surface water. They also channel various kinds of solid and liquid waste. As the conurbation grows in terms of population and across space, pressure increases on waste management and the drainage of surface water. The vulnerability to flooding in Ghanaian cities is the result of interlinked socio-political processes manifesting against a backdrop of rapid urbanization (Poku-Boansi et al. 2020; Cobbinah et al. 2023). During my research, engineers and technocrats impressed on me that the infrastructure was "overwhelmed."

A concern for future flooding motivates different kinds of infrastructural intervention. I build on the recognition that the creation and maintenance of infrastructure can and does involve actors other than the state (Mwaura and Lawhorn 2023), opening up my analysis to the relational and affective processes through which storm drains are constructed. From this perspective, residents' efforts are a response to an increasingly complex set of dynamic factors that shape the flows of water through the city (Acosta and Ley 2023). Precipitation patterns become harder to predict, the built environment changes runoff and flows in the watercourses, while the state's capacity to protect and to help after disaster is also uncertain. In addition, residents must contend with infrastructure that is unreliable, whether self-constructed or centrally organized, and

*Sandbags and tires serve as flood barrier in Mempeasem, Accra.*

Photo: Afra Foli, 2020.

deal with the fickleness of others, whether as collaborators in responding to the threat of flood or as upstream neighbours whose interventions may change the intensity of flow downstream.

In June 2018, a doctor was swept off a road bridge in her car by strong floodwaters in the Teshie neighbourhood. The death of this young woman was brought to my attention by residents of Teshie Demo during my research on drainage infrastructure in 2020 and 2021. When I asked about people's interventions in the watercourses I was told about this tragedy, which served as warning of what the rains could bring. In the months leading up to the rainy season, which usually starts in May, pressure mounts for those living in flood-prone areas to prepare adequately. An elderly man in that neighbourhood – I will call him Nana – expressed in hyperbolic terms that he had built his high wall out of concrete blocks in preparation against the “tsunami” that would one day come. Nana lived by the Kordzor waterway, and the wall he constructed was two meters high, covered in tiles and sat on top of a concrete base that stretched to the bank of the waterway. He explained to me that he worked outside of Accra but he called from time to time when it rained to find out how things were going. Usually, his family would tell Nana that the gutter (as the waterway is generally called) was full but not flooding.

Elsewhere in the city, by the Odaw river, I spoke with a woman in her sixties, Esi, who had been living in a compound house in the low- to mid-income neighbourhood of Alajo for thirteen years.<sup>1</sup> Every rainy season it would flood, so before June Esi and the other families in the compound made preparations. She explained in Ewe: “Before leaving the house in this period we ready the building and our belongings so that they are protected.” Esi started this after the floods of 3 June 2015, when she lost everything.<sup>2</sup> In 2018 the landlord increased the rent and used part of the extra funds to build a low wall around the property. The wall and the raised entrance serve as protection from the floods. All the tenants raised their doorways as well, at their own cost. In 2005, a concrete drain had been constructed on the other side of the bridge, just fifty metres away. It prevented flooding in that area, but Esi's side remained as it was. She said that because the elected member of parliament thought of their neighborhood as a National Democratic Congress (NDC) stronghold, he did not build new drains. Despite being their local representative, he was affiliated with the New Patriotic Party (NPP).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A typical compound house consists of multiple households occupying a single building complex (Manful 2010).

<sup>2</sup> June 2015 saw some of the worst floods in Accra's history. A fuel station where people were sheltering from the storm caught fire and many people died.

<sup>3</sup> The NDC and NPP are the two largest political parties in Ghana.

Esi also relayed how one neighbour had rented a small excavator and began dredging their gutter to increase flow. He was not a politician, just an ordinary citizen; however, when he started some young men told him that this was not what they desired – they wanted the gutter to be lined with concrete like the other side. He got angry and left. “The elder women in the community, myself included, went to plead with him and he came back to finish the job.”

These narratives demonstrate what is at stake for residents as they negotiate the risk of flooding. In retelling the story of the fatal disaster with the doctor on the bridge, or in invoking a “tsunami,” my interlocutors expressed the weight of stress they experienced living along the waterway. The intensity of these feelings has not immobilized them. Their justified fears have fuelled individual or collective efforts to intervene in material terms, involving (micro-)political dynamics.

**Infra-politics of Flood Response**

The experiences of and responses to flood risk are not equal. In documenting infrastructural interventions along the waterway, I also noted the discrepancy between makeshift interventions such as sandbag barriers created by poorer residents and the cement and concrete reinforcements available to the city’s upper classes. For some residents the threat of rain caused concern as to whether one’s home would stay dry or even remain standing. While both Nana and Esi were worried about flooding and so took infrastructural measures, there were differences in the resources at their disposal. Their responses to anxiety were mediated by socio-economic status. The ubiquitous fear of floods did not translate to shared material configurations of infrastructure.

Interventions into the waterways are both the medium and the materialization of negotiations about flood risk and about politics (Ojani 2023). This is evident at the micro-level in interactions between neighbours, as they forged coalitions but also contested each other’s activities vis-à-vis the waterways. Residents coordinated with their neighbours, sometimes successfully and sometimes clashing over how best to manage the risk of flooding, while also continuing to make claims on the government. They formed groups to pool funds, carry out construction work and pressure local politicians to intervene. I often saw these forms of collaboration at the scale of a compound or a street, for example where residents contributed either their money or their labour in the construction of a gutter to channel runoff. This was not always a smooth process, reflecting the fact that while fears may be shared, the impact of flooding and the state’s response to self-constructed flood barriers are not the same among all residents.



*Sand and nylon bags used to construct flood barriers in the upmarket and upstream neighbourhood of East Legon, Accra. Photo: Afra Foli, 2020.*



In addition, I witnessed politics at work between residents and their government representatives, as drainage became the site of negotiations about authority (Foli 2023) and belonging (Anand 2017). Esi’s reading of electoral politics in the construction of the concrete drain in the Alajo neighborhood exemplifies this. Regardless of its veracity, her feeling that local politicians designate drainage infrastructure based on party politics reflects a common understanding of how infrastructure is provided. It reified lines of separation in the neighbourhood, heightening her worries with regard to the upcoming rainy season.

*Flood barrier in the mid-stream and mixed-income East Airport neighborhood, Accra. Photo: Afra Foli, 2020.*



In the end, the DIY efforts of Accra’s residents to protect their homes, their livelihoods and indeed their lives demonstrate infrastructure as a locus of material and affective negotiations (Scaramelli 2019). By paying attention to these tangible manifestations of flood anxiety, it becomes clear how unevenness is exacerbated, reflecting patterns of difference elsewhere (Batubara et al. 2018). However, in the moments of collaboration I see potential for anxiety to mobilize toward collective action. As the state struggles to expand infrastructural capacity to match the recurring floods<sup>4</sup>, these everyday interventions indicate that infrastructural anxiety could shape diffuse but interconnected urban collectivities that connect to but go beyond top-down infrastructural development.

<sup>4</sup> These urban floods have been recurring for decades. In a 2024 press conference, a project coordinator termed them “perennial” (Asare 2024).

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**Cite as:**

Foli, Afra. 2024. "Preparing for Rain: Flood Defences in Accra's Waterways." *Roadsides* 12: 37-43. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202401206>

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ISSN 2624-9081

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