

# Flooding in Thailand: flee, fight or float

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**The severity of recent flooding in Thailand and the probability of future flooding have triggered a re-assessment of coping mechanisms employed by both the Thai population and the government.**

Flooding has not always been a cause for human displacement in Thailand. Thai vernacular architecture, culture and lifestyles were adapted to allow those living on fertile lowlands to continue with their daily lives during annual floods. However, this has changed with a larger population, the growth of urban centres and the extension of increasingly sophisticated water management systems.

In 2011, unprecedented flooding caused by tropical storm Nock-Ten affected more than three million people in 74 provinces from the end of July for over three months. By September the government's efforts were focused on diverting the water from the capital, Bangkok, to protect the nation's financial and economic centre. Faced with the approach of slow-moving masses of water, the residents of Bangkok were left to watch, speculate and make decisions as best they could based on the colossal amount of information, as well as misinformation, publicly available.

With information from diverse and varying sources, thousands of people chose to voluntarily relocate themselves ahead of the possible arrival of floodwater. Houses were closed and sealed up while cars were parked on any available higher ground or 'wrapped

up' following one of many on-line instructions. Some residents went to stay in other provinces with friends and relatives or into longer-term rentals in hotels and resorts throughout the unaffected parts of the country. Some saw it as an opportunity to take their families on holiday, but none expected the flood – or their voluntary relocation – to last as long as it did and in many cases returned to their homes and businesses to find that they had misjudged the height and strength of standing floodwater and/or had used inadequate waterproofing methods. Many others were caught by the flood and forced into emergency relocations, often to collective centres or into finding ad hoc, temporary solutions. Several of these collective centres were subsequently flooded, forcing their residents to experience multiple displacements.

For those affected who chose to stay on in flooded areas, three main categories emerged. In the first category were those still adept at living with water, who generally live in parts of Thailand that continue to face, and survive, annual floods. With simple precautions in place, and with some basic assistance and support, especially in cases where essential livelihood activities have been put on hold, they can efficiently cope with floods of up to two to three metres in height. In the second group were those who had the resources to fight off encroaching water with strategy and might. They built up a second wall, installed water pumps, sandbagged their entrances or purchased small motor-boats. In many cases, this particular group was well positioned to provide neighbourhood logistical support to others too. The last and largest category was of people who, for various social and economic reasons, decided against moving into collective centres but in turn lacked the resources either to move away or be self-sufficient at home. This group was largely dependent on external assistance and support for their overall well-being and meeting of basic needs during the emergency.

## Reflection

Of the notable proportion of the affected population choosing not to evacuate their homes at all, some acted as community patrol units in their neighbourhoods for those who decided to relocate, and as distributors of assistance to those less able to cope with the flood while remaining at home. Access to the internet and the overwhelming use of social media platforms meant that information regarding on-going flooding status, unmet needs and volunteer opportunities was regularly updated and publicly accessible. It also meant, however, that communities with little or no access to the internet were less likely to receive assistance and support in a timely manner.

The flood of 2011 also saw the emergence of a new breed of tech-savvy humanitarian volunteers and



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interesting tools, such as [www.thaiflood.com](http://www.thaiflood.com) which attempted to fill the information management gap, together with its Facebook page and mobile crowd-sourcing 'app' giving GPS-located information on the flood; the much-talked-about 'infomercials' from RooSuFlood<sup>1</sup> which provided easy-to-digest and timely thematic episodes for viewers to help them make informed decisions; and the mapping service RooTanNam with its hotline for those trying to make sense of the approaching flood and its likely effect on their homes. With this expanding and diverse range of actors, coherent coordination and consistent information management were often identified as the greatest challenges.

### Looking forward

As the government and local communities prepare for inevitable future floods, all parties will need to consider both 'stay-and-fight' and 'flight' options. There are three key components for analysis, dialogue and action planning: a) community-based resilience and awareness building for disaster preparedness; b) an adaptive framework for coordinated humanitarian assistance and protection in relation to the varying scenarios; and c) capacity building with follow-up support for the diverse actors in disaster mitigation (including prevention of displacement), preparedness and response at national, provincial and local levels.

In the wake of the 2011 flooding, the general public has essentially been overloaded with 'how-to' campaigns from both the private and public sectors, providing them with 'knowledge' and 'do-it-yourself' options ranging from better ways to waterproof a home to health care during a flood and precautions needed when cleaning up a building after a long period of inundation.

In contrast, the public's knowledge and understanding of national standards, humanitarian principles and codes of good conduct are being overlooked. With the private sector and civil society actors playing leading roles in the response to the flood, it is clear that all future actors would benefit from a common understanding of the need for accountability, roles and responsibilities in an overall response, and orientation in the language and structure of both national and local coordination frameworks. During Thailand's first Collective Centre Coordination and Management training, which was designed and led by the International Organization for Migration's Thailand office in early 2012 at the request of Thailand's Department of Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation, participants reflected that coordination could be further strengthened and better understood by all those involved.

As Thailand starts the process of renewing its national contingency planning for natural disaster in 2012, the country is reflecting on and re-examining strategies that can successfully be adapted to local communities' evolving choices of response to flooding. Effective awareness raising and capacity building will play a key role in ensuring that all mandated and voluntary practitioners are efficiently and confidently prepared in the roles and responsibilities that they will have to take on during the country's natural disasters in the future.

Thailand as a whole is beginning to understand that robust resources, planning and preparedness are required if the 'stay-and-fight' option is to be successful.

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1. [www.youtube.com/roosuflood](http://www.youtube.com/roosuflood)