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## **How to protect ourselves from floods**

More than half the world's population and more than 80 percent of our cities are found in deltas prone to flooding from the sea or rivers. If temporary, the positive effects of flood waters on soil fertility are well known, as the ancient civilisation of the Nile and the Indus deltas show.

But the risks and damage caused by flooding may increase as our climate changes, with sea levels rising and extreme weather events such as storms becoming more frequent. No other natural disasters strike as deadly as floods.

In Asia the impact is most devastating because of population density. But, everywhere, as population and wealth grow, we have more at stake. And hence more to protect. The question is: can we protect everybody and every property?

With the recent suffering in Burma, Bangladesh and New Orleans in mind, our sense of solidarity indicates that every human being has a right to the same level of protection - yet this is easier said than done.

Often, poor coordination, corruption and neglect cause additional casualties. But even with adequate government policy, there are still moral issues to consider. Risk can never be eliminated entirely. So how do we weigh the costs of protection of potential flood victims as in comparison to, for example, victims of traffic accidents? Can city councils which give out land for building in flood prone areas be held responsible? Should we prepare to abandon some inhabited areas? If sea level rise is, in part, the result of global warming, should the rich industrialised countries pay the poor?

There are no easy answers, and there is not even an obvious place to discuss this internationally. Clearly, costly prevention is only part of the answer and some degree of living with the natural flow of the water may be another.

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