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Do we learn differently from flash floods? The experience of a coastal Mediterranean residential area (Calonge, Catalonia, Spain)

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Floods continue to be the most important natural hazard in the Spanish Mediterranean coast. The extraordinary (and without parallel in Europe) urban growth in coastal river catchments of the last 15 years has resulted in the almost total occupation of the coastline and the expansion of residential areas inland, many times following fluvial courses. Exposure to floods, therefore, has increased considerably, both because of the occupation of flood prone land and perhaps more relevant, because of the alteration of local hydrological cycles. The town of Calonge, in the Costa Brava, represents a fairly typical example of this growing exposure to floods. The last episode (October 2005) caused one human victim, some 20 million euro in losses, and important disruptions in the road network and other critical public services.

In this paper we want to explore the social assessment of these phenomena by local populations and the possible solutions to damages caused by flooding, both at the individual and at the local levels,. This social assessment has been elaborated through surveys (for permanent residents and non-permanent residents), and focus groups with representatives of a number of public, private and civic organisations. One interesting result of our analysis concerns the role of non-structural measures to manage floods, especially land use planning and other regulations of urban growth. While in the focus groups there was a general agreement in relation to the need of implementing such measures, at the individual level, citizens were more in favour of structural measures; that is, flood control works, instead of planning regulations. This apparent contradiction illustrates an important gap between individual and group preferences for flood hazard management that needs further attention.