

Ireland suffers widespread flooding

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Thousands of people were forced from their homes across Ireland last month after torrential rain caused severe flooding. Many areas have been submerged for more than two weeks, and the cost for repairs is anticipated to run into the hundreds of millions of euros. One estimate suggests that the damages may be as high as €1 billion.

The worst-affected areas were in the south and west of the Republic. Nationwide, it has been estimated that at least 600 households were forced to evacuate, displacing 1,500 people. Many others chose to leave their homes due to flood warnings.

In Cork, the town centre was swamped by five feet of water on November 20, after a dam several kilometres upstream on the river Lee was opened. The decision to open the dam was taken after rapidly rising water levels raised fears that the structure would fail. Buildings at University College Cork were damaged, as well as the local hospital. In the city centre, a quay wall collapsed.

The flooding led to 50,000 people losing their water supplies for almost a week, with some areas only being reconnected on November 30. Power supplies were disrupted, and houses and businesses extensively damaged. Hundreds of soldiers were deployed in an attempt to secure properties and help evacuate residents. According to Environment Minister John Gormley, 40 percent of houses in the north of Cork were without water on November 21 and there was widespread concern regarding sanitation.

Severe damage took place in Galway, where vast areas of rural farmland were submerged. Farmers suffered the loss of animal feed stocks for the winter, and around 18,000 people lost water supplies. Roads and rail links were rendered impassable.

Throughout the last week of November, flooding spread to counties Laois, Offaly, Kilkenny, Limerick, Clare, Kerry and Tipperary. On Thursday, November

26, a number of rivers including the Barrow, Suck, Erne and Shannon burst their banks in the west of Ireland, resulting in whole areas being cut off. In the east, the town of Kildare suffered most when the Liffy burst its banks on November 29, causing many to leave their homes and forcing the evacuation of three nursing homes.

Heavy rain affected parts of Northern Ireland with areas of the country of Fermanagh in particular being under water. The Shannon, the longest river in all of Britain, continued to see rising water levels in the first week of December, raising concerns for towns and rural areas along its banks.

The impact for those in the worst-affected areas has been catastrophic. Schools and colleges have been forced to close, including University College Cork, where around 500 offices and research laboratories were destroyed by the floodwaters. As well as the damage to homes, which will run into several hundred million euros, many businesses, which are already under pressure due to the economic crisis, face closure. Mark Fielding of the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME) described the floods as “the final nail in the coffin” for many businesses.

Government officials and local authorities have blamed unprecedented weather for the widespread damage, with many areas recording above-average rainfall for November. Notwithstanding extreme weather conditions, much of the damage has resulted from a lack of regulation, underfunding of local authorities, and the explosion of building development on flood plains in recent decades.

Events of this nature are far from unusual. Last year, extensive flooding took place in many of the same areas that suffered damage this time around. In the end, the cost of the 2008 floods was estimated to be €98 million. They exposed the claims that Ireland’s years of economic prosperity had allowed for the

development of high-quality infrastructure and other social services.

The lag in these areas continues to present major problems, despite the many years of so-called “Celtic Tiger” economic growth. As part of the legacy of British colonial rule, infrastructure in Ireland remained primitive throughout the twentieth century. Construction on motorways was not begun until into the 1980s.

When significant economic growth began in the early 1990s, government resources were diverted into offering tax breaks and other incentives for corporations to relocate to Ireland. This included the development of the minimum level of transportation and communications necessary to facilitate the production and transfer of goods to export markets.

Alongside this lack of investment in infrastructure, local authority budgets have been cut recently, particularly as a result of the onset of the global economic crisis. Ireland has been hit hard by the downturn, with billions of euros in spending reductions announced by the government since mid-2008. The 2010 budget is due next week, with Finance Minister Brian Lenihan set to announce further cuts of up to €4 billion.

One official from Tipperary council noted that the budget for local authorities to maintain ditches, drains, and other crucial flood-prevention facilities had been halved. “General operatives, who cut inlets in ditches and open and dredge drains, are retiring and not being replaced. When these are blocked, floodwaters rise instantly,” noted Michael Fitzgerald in a comment reported in the Irish *Sunday Business Post Online* on November 29.

“So much money was wasted on the hiring of consultants in the good times, instead of keeping budgets for basic maintenance,” he added.

The vast expansion of building development in areas considered at risk to flooding has also been identified as a source of the problem. Since Ireland’s economic boom gained momentum from the property market, successive governments permitted new building projects to go ahead with virtually no restrictions. Housing estates, supermarkets, and businesses were built in high-risk areas by private firms that bore no responsibility for the consequences when individuals bought the properties.

Flood plains are areas of land located on the banks of rivers, which can act as a natural barrier to the spread of floodwater if they are left clear. When used for building or infrastructure projects however, this benefit is lost. The result is that larger volumes of water are transferred to areas further downstream, compounding the impact of flooding. Remarking about the flooding in Ireland, John Sweeney, a climatologist and Nobel-prize recipient noted, “I have been quite struck in the last number of days by the number of modern housing estates I have seen flooded that are located on flood plains.”

Criticism has also been levelled at the organisations responsible for flood warning and management, in particular the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). The ESB controls the dams on Ireland’s rivers, but it is also an electricity company that produces and sells hydroelectric energy. As Professor Richard Tol wrote in the *Irish Independent* on December 1, “Hydropower is more profitable if the reservoirs are full, while flood management is easier if they are empty. There is a clear conflict of interest between the ESB as a power company and as a flood-management authority.”

In the face of such widespread devastation, the government has to date pledged a meagre €12 million in aid.

As well as suffering the immediate impact of the floods, it will be working people who will be compelled to pay for the reconstruction. Reports indicate that insurance companies intend to push premiums up steeply, even for those not living in high-risk areas. Due to the frequency of floods in Ireland over recent years, some firms have stated that insurance will not be available for people in many areas.



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