International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Urban Ponds and Canals as Micro-Storage Nodes for Flood Resilience

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Abstract

Urban flooding has emerged as a critical challenge in rapidly urbanizing cities due to increased surface imperviousness, loss of natural drainage systems, and the rising frequency of extreme rainfall events. Conventional flood-management approaches continue to rely heavily on centralized grey infrastructure, which often proves inadequate under climate-induced hydrological stress. In contrast, decentralized and nature-based solutions such as urban ponds and canals remain underutilized despite their inherent capacity to store, delay, and infiltrate stormwater.

This paper investigates the role of urban ponds and canals as decentralized micro-storage nodes within urban flood-resilience frameworks. It examines their hydrological, spatial, and ecological functions and identifies a key research gap: the absence of a parameter-based planning framework to evaluate and integrate these waterbodies into urban flood-management systems. To address this gap, eight national and international case studies including examples from Singapore, India, China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Iraq are analyzed to assess the hydrological performance of ponds and canal systems under flood conditions.

Through comparative analysis, ten critical performance parameters are identified, including storage capacity, infiltration rate, retention and detention time, peak-flow attenuation, runoff volume, retention capacity ratio, pond depth, side slope stability, sedimentation rate, and catchment–pond relationship. These parameters are synthesized into quantitative, planning-oriented guidelines that provide measurable benchmarks for assessing, restoring, and redesigning urban ponds and canals as functional micro-storage units.

The findings demonstrate that when reconnected, restored, and systemically integrated, urban ponds and canals can collectively operate as a decentralized blue-green infrastructure network capable of significantly reducing flood peaks, enhancing groundwater recharge, and improving urban resilience. The study contributes a replicable, evidence-based framework to support water-sensitive and climate-responsive urban planning, particularly in the context of Indian cities.

Keywords: Urban Flood Resilience, Urban Ponds, Urban Canals, Micro-Storage Nodes, Blue–Green Infrastructure, Nature-Based Solutions, Stormwater Management

1. Introduction

Urban flooding has become an increasingly frequent and severe challenge in rapidly urbanizing cities, p-

articularly in developing countries. Accelerated land-use conversion, expansion of impervious surfaces, encroachment of natural drainage systems, and inadequate stormwater infrastructure have significantly reduced the capacity of urban areas to manage intense rainfall events. These challenges are further compounded by climate change, which has increased the intensity and unpredictability of precipitation, overwhelming conventional drainage networks.

Traditional urban flood-management strategies have largely relied on centralized, grey infrastructure such as underground drains, pumping stations, and channelized canals designed to convey stormwater away as quickly as possible. While effective under moderate rainfall conditions, such systems often fail during extreme events, leading to surface flooding, waterlogging, and infrastructure damage. Moreover, rapid conveyance-based approaches disconnect cities from natural hydrological processes and offer limited adaptability under changing climatic conditions.

In contrast, contemporary urban resilience and water-sensitive planning frameworks emphasize decentralized and nature-based solutions that work with natural systems rather than against them. Urban ponds and canals, which historically formed the backbone of traditional water-management systems in many regions, possess significant potential to function as decentralized micro-storage nodes. These waterbodies can temporarily store excess runoff, delay peak flows, promote infiltration, and distribute flood storage across multiple spatial scales.

Despite their widespread presence in urban landscapes, ponds and canals are frequently neglected, encroached upon, or treated merely as aesthetic or drainage features. Their role as functional components of urban flood-resilience systems remains poorly integrated into planning practice, particularly in Indian cities. This paper argues that urban ponds and canals should be re-conceptualized as active hydrological infrastructure capable of enhancing urban flood resilience when systematically restored and connected.

The study aims to evaluate the performance of urban ponds and canals as micro-storage nodes and to develop a parameter-based planning framework that supports their integration into flood-resilient urban development strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Urban Flooding and the Shift Toward Decentralized Solutions

Existing literature identifies urban flooding because of both hydrological and spatial planning failures. High runoff coefficients, reduced infiltration, and fragmented drainage networks are commonly cited factors contributing to flood vulnerability. Recent studies emphasize the limitations of centralized drainage systems and highlight the need for distributed, adaptive, and nature-based approaches that enhance local storage and delay runoff.

Decentralized stormwater systems such as retention ponds, detention basins, wetlands, and green corridors have been shown to reduce peak discharge and flood duration by distributing stormwater storage across multiple nodes. This approach aligns with principles of sustainable urban drainage systems, water-sensitive urban design, and blue-green infrastructure planning.

2.2 Urban Ponds as Hydrological and Ecological Infrastructure

Urban ponds are small to medium-sized waterbodies located within built-up areas that serve hydrological, ecological, and social functions. From a flood-resilience perspective, ponds act as localized storage units that intercept runoff, reduce peak flows, and promote groundwater recharge. Studies highlight their capacity to flatten flood hydrographs by delaying runoff discharge and spreading

stormwater storage spatially.

Beyond hydrological benefits, urban ponds contribute to ecological restoration, microclimate regulation, and urban livability. Vegetated pond edges improve water quality by filtering pollutants and stabilizing banks, while also providing recreational and social value. However, much of the existing research focuses on ecological or aesthetic outcomes, with limited emphasis on quantifiable hydrological performance parameters relevant to flood mitigation.

2.3 Urban Canals as Connective Flood-Resilience Infrastructure

Urban canals function as linear water corridors that collect, convey, and regulate stormwater flows. Historically designed for navigation, irrigation, or drainage, canals are increasingly being reimagined as multi-functional blue–green infrastructure elements. When designed with adequate cross-sections, gentle slopes, and vegetated edges, canals can provide temporary storage and attenuate peak flows rather than acting solely as rapid conveyance channels.

Literature on canal restoration demonstrates that reconnecting canals with ponds, wetlands, and floodplains significantly improves system-level flood performance. Canals thus serve as the connective framework, linking multiple micro-storage nodes into a coherent hydrological network. However, planning frameworks often fail to recognize canals as storage assets, leading to missed opportunities for integrated flood management.

2.4 Micro-Storage Nodes and Flood Resilience

Micro-storage nodes are decentralized water-storage elements that capture and temporarily retain stormwater within urban catchments. These systems enhance flood resilience by increasing absorptive capacity, delaying runoff discharge, and reducing pressure on downstream drainage infrastructure. Research indicates that networks of small storage units can collectively achieve flood mitigation outcomes comparable to large centralized systems, while offering greater flexibility and redundancy.

Despite growing recognition of micro-storage strategies, there is a notable absence of planning-oriented, parameter-based frameworks that quantify the performance of ponds and canals as micro-storage nodes. Existing resilience frameworks emphasize qualitative indicators, while measurable hydrological parameters necessary for design and planning decision-making remain underdeveloped.

The literature reveals three key gaps:

1. Limited integration of urban ponds and canals into formal flood-resilience planning frameworks.
2. Insufficient emphasis on quantifiable hydrological parameters that define the performance of these systems as micro-storage nodes.
3. A lack of transferable, planning-oriented guidelines applicable to data-scarce urban contexts, particularly in Indian cities.

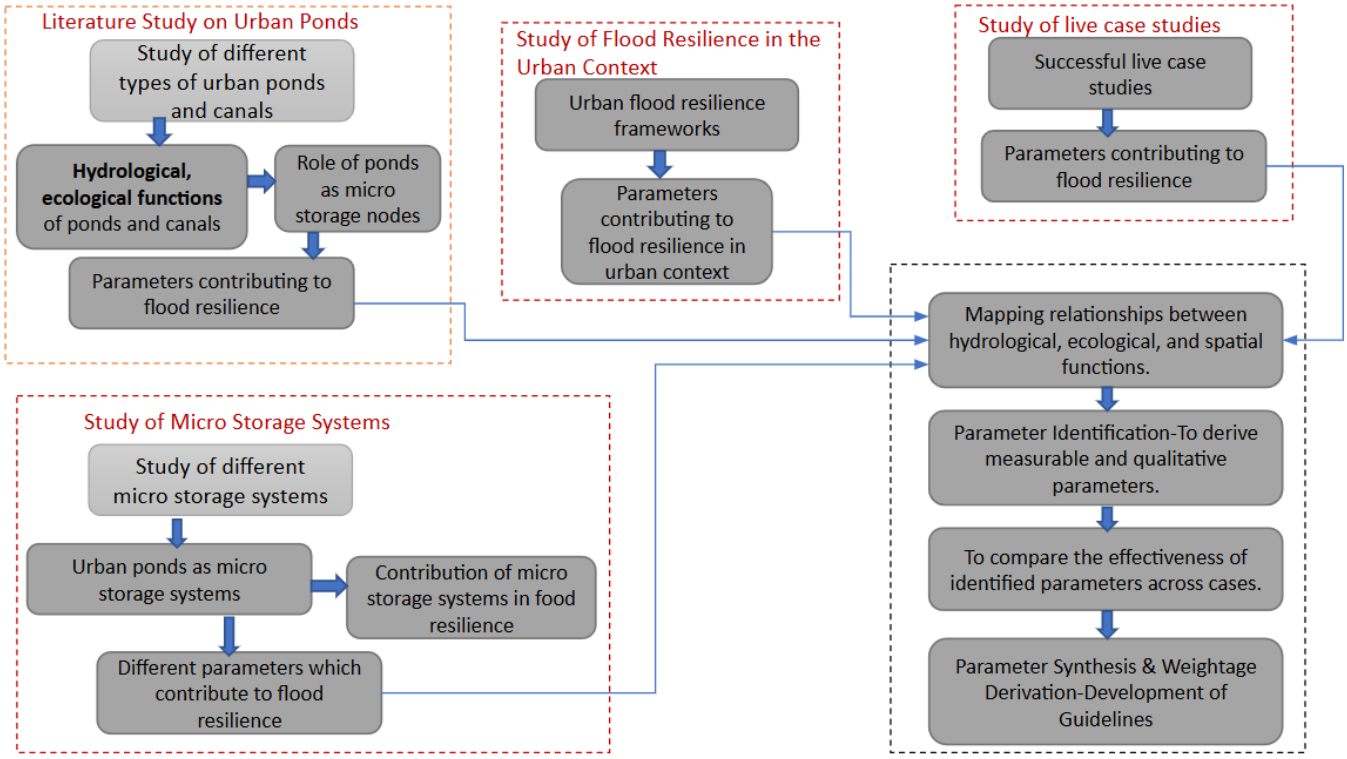
This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing performance parameters from global case studies and translating them into practical planning guidelines for integrating urban ponds and canals into flood-resilient urban systems.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative research methodology aimed at evaluating the role of urban ponds and canals as decentralized micro-storage nodes for flood resilience. Rather than relying on site-specific hydrological modelling, the approach focuses on synthesizing measurable performance parameters from established literature, resilience frameworks, and documented case studies. This method enables the development of a transferable, planning-oriented framework applicable to diverse

urban contexts, including data-scarce Indian cities.
The methodology consists of four sequential stages followed by a synthesis phase.

Figure 1: Methodology



3.1 Literature and Framework Review

A comprehensive review of scholarly literature on urban flooding, stormwater management, blue–green infrastructure, and nature-based solutions was undertaken to identify the hydrological and spatial functions of ponds and canals. In parallel, global urban resilience and flood-management frameworks, including blue-green infrastructure, sponge city concepts, and urban resilience models were examined to extract commonly referenced flood-resilience indicators and performance criteria.

This stage established an initial pool of qualitative and quantitative parameters related to storage, infiltration, connectivity, and flood attenuation.

3.2 Review of Micro-Storage Systems

To contextualize ponds and canals within broader flood-management strategies, existing micro-storage systems such as retention ponds, detention basins, constructed wetlands, and decentralized stormwater facilities were reviewed. This helped clarify how small-scale, distributed storage elements collectively influence catchment-level flood behavior.

Key characteristics such as temporary storage duration, runoff delay, infiltration capacity, and system redundancy were identified as essential attributes of effective micro-storage networks.

3.3 Comparative Case Study Analysis

Eight national and international case studies were selected based on their documented flood-mitigation performance, diversity of scale, and relevance to urban contexts:

- Jurong Island Pond, Singapore
- Velachery Retention Pond, Chennai, India

- Bajghera Urban Pond, Gurugram, India
- Bishan–Ang Mo Kio Park, Singapore
- Qunli Stormwater Park, Harbin, China
- Murray Urban Pond System, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Paalkulam Cascade Pond System, Jaffna, Sri Lanka
- Urban and Peri-Urban Ponds, Erbil City, Iraq

Secondary data from published articles, technical reports, and official project documentation were analyzed for each case. Emphasis was placed on extracting measurable hydrological outcomes such as runoff reduction, peak-flow attenuation, detention duration, storage capacity, and groundwater recharge effects.

3.4 Parameter Extraction and Synthesis

Parameters identified across literature, frameworks, micro-storage systems, and case studies were systematically compared. Only parameters that appeared consistently across multiple sources and demonstrated a clear influence on flood performance were retained. These parameters were then synthesized into a final set forming the basis for guideline development.

4. Case Study Synthesis and Key Findings

The comparative analysis of the eight case studies reveals that urban ponds and canals significantly enhance flood resilience when designed and operated as interconnected micro-storage systems rather than isolated elements.

4.1 Hydrological Performance of Ponds

Across multiple cases, restored or newly designed ponds demonstrated substantial capacity to store and delay stormwater runoff. Storage volumes ranged from small neighborhood-scale ponds to larger interconnected pond systems, collectively reducing peak discharge during storm events. Case studies consistently showed peak-flow reductions between approximately 30% and 70%, depending on storage capacity, catchment size, and connectivity.

Unlined or partially lined pond beds facilitated infiltration and groundwater recharge, while controlled inlet–outlet structures enabled regulated release of stored water. Optimal pond depths and gentle side slopes improved both storage efficiency and bank stability, reducing erosion and sediment accumulation.

4.2 Role of Canals as Connective Infrastructure

Canals emerged as a critical connective element, linking multiple ponds into a distributed hydrological network. In successful cases, canals functioned not only as conveyance channels but also as linear storage corridors capable of temporarily retaining stormwater. Naturalized canal sections with wider cross-sections and vegetated edges enhanced detention capacity and reduced flow velocity.

The integration of canals with upstream ponds significantly improved system-level flood performance by distributing runoff across multiple nodes and preventing localized drainage overload.

4.3 Identified Performance Parameters

The synthesis resulted in the identification of ten core parameters governing the effectiveness of ponds and canals as micro-storage nodes:

1. Storage capacity
2. Infiltration rate
3. Retention and detention time
4. Peak-flow attenuation

5. Runoff volume managed
6. Retention capacity ratio
7. Pond depth
8. Side slope and bank stability
9. Sedimentation rate
10. Catchment–pond relationship

These parameters collectively define the hydrological efficiency, resilience capacity, and long-term functionality of urban micro-storage systems.

4.4 Results

The analysis of eight national and international case studies demonstrates that urban ponds and canals, when designed and operated as interconnected systems, significantly improve urban flood resilience. The results confirm that decentralized micro-storage networks can reduce flood intensity, delay runoff discharge, and enhance groundwater recharge across multiple spatial scales.

4.5 Hydrological Outcomes

Across the reviewed cases, restored and integrated pond–canal systems consistently achieved:

- **Peak-flow reduction** ranging from approximately **30% to 70%**, depending on storage capacity and connectivity.
- **Temporary detention of stormwater** for durations between **6 and 24 hours**, effectively flattening flood hydrographs.
- **Reduction in runoff volume** entering downstream drainage systems through localized storage and infiltration.
- **Groundwater recharge improvements**, particularly in unlined or partially lined pond systems.

The results indicate that distributed storage across multiple small nodes performs more reliably under extreme rainfall conditions than reliance on a single centralized facility.

4.6 Performance of Canals within Micro-Storage Networks

Canals played a critical role in regulating stormwater movement between storage nodes. In successful cases, canals functioned as **linear detention corridors**, enabling controlled conveyance rather than rapid discharge. Wider cross-sections, reduced longitudinal slopes, and vegetated edges enhanced storage capacity and flow attenuation.

The results show that canal-pond integration significantly reduces localized flooding by redistributing stormwater across the network, thereby lowering pressure on conventional drainage infrastructure.

5. Parameter-Based Planning Guidelines

Based on the synthesis of case-study performance data, ten key parameters were identified and translated into planning-oriented guidelines. These parameters provide measurable benchmarks for evaluating existing waterbodies and designing new micro-storage systems.

Table 1: Parameter-Based Guidelines for Urban Ponds and Canals as Micro-Storage Nodes

Parameter	Recommended Range / Guideline
Storage Capacity	25–50% of contributing catchment runoff
Infiltration Rate	2–10 mm per hour (site-dependent)
Retention / Detention Time	6–24 hours

Peak-Flow Attenuation	30–70% reduction
Runoff Volume Managed	40–60% of storm runoff
Retention Capacity Ratio	0.3–0.7
Pond Depth	2.5–3.0 m
Side Slopes	Gentle slopes (1:3 to 1:5) for stability
Sedimentation Management	Periodic desilting every 3–5 years
Catchment–Pond Relationship	Multiple ponds per catchment preferred over single large pond

5.1 Application of Guidelines

The guidelines enable planners and urban local bodies to:

- Assess existing ponds and canals using quantifiable indicators.
- Prioritize restoration based on flood-mitigation potential.
- Design new waterbodies as functional micro-storage units rather than ornamental features.
- Integrate ponds and canals into master plans, local area plans, and resilience strategies.

Importantly, the framework is adaptable to data-scarce contexts, allowing informed decision-making even where detailed hydrological models are unavailable.

6. Analysis

The findings reinforce the argument that urban ponds and canals should be recognized as **active hydrological infrastructure** rather than passive landscape elements. When reconnected and strategically distributed, these systems collectively enhance urban absorptive capacity and reduce flood vulnerability.

The parameter-based approach bridges a critical gap between qualitative resilience frameworks and practical planning implementation. Unlike centralized grey infrastructure, micro-storage networks offer flexibility, redundancy, and scalability, making them particularly suitable for rapidly growing cities facing climate uncertainty.

For Indian cities, where many traditional ponds and canals remain encroached or underutilized, this framework provides a pathway for low-cost, ecologically sustainable flood mitigation. By embedding micro-storage logic into statutory planning instruments, cities can transition toward water-sensitive and climate-responsive development.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that urban ponds and canals, when restored and integrated as decentralized micro-storage nodes, can substantially enhance urban flood resilience. Through comparative case-study analysis, ten critical performance parameters were identified and synthesized into measurable planning guidelines.

The study contributes to a replicable, evidence-based framework that supports the systematic integration of ponds and canals into urban flood-management strategies. By shifting the focus from rapid drainage to distributed storage and delay, the proposed approach offers a sustainable alternative to conventional flood-control systems and advances the implementation of blue-green infrastructure in urban planning practice.

Acknowledgement

The author sincerely expresses deep gratitude to **Prof. Ar. Surya S**, Associate Professor and Head of the Department, School of Architecture and Planning, Government Engineering College, Thrissur, for her constant guidance, encouragement, and valuable support throughout this work. The author also thanks **Prof. Geetha A**, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and Planning, Government Engineering College, Thrissur, for her guidance and support.

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