Hydro-meteorological uncertainty propagation in a model cascade framework to inundation prediction

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation is to study the propagation of meteorological uncertainty within a cascade modelling approach to inundation prediction. The methodology is comprised of a Numerical Weather Prediction Model (NWP), a distributed rainfall-runoff model and a standard 2D hydrodynamic model. The cascade of models is used to reproduce an extreme flood event that took place in the Southeast of Mexico, during November 2009. The event is selected as high quality field data (e.g. rain gauges; discharge) and satellite imagery are available. Uncertainty in the meteorological model (Weather Research and Forecasting model) is evaluated through the use of a multi-physics ensemble technique, which considers twelve parameterization schemes to determine a given precipitation. The resulting precipitation fields are used as input in a distributed hydrological model, enabling the determination of different hydrographs associated to this event. Lastly, by means of a standard 2D hydrodynamic model, hydrographs are used as forcing conditions to study the propagation of the meteorological uncertainty to an estimated flooded area. Results show the utility of the selected modelling approach to investigate error propagation within a cascade of models. Moreover, the error associated with the determination of the runoff, is shown to be lower than that obtained in the precipitation estimation suggesting that uncertainty associated to rainfall predictions does not necessarily increase within a model cascade.

1 Introduction

Hydro-meteorological hazards can have cascading effects and far-reaching implications on water security, with political, social, economic and environmental consequences. Millions of people worldwide are forcibly displaced as a result of natural disasters, creating political tensions and social needs to support them. These events observed in developed and developing nations alike, highlight the necessity to generate a better understanding on what causes them and how we can better manage and reduce the risk (Kunreuther et al., 2013).

The assessment of flood risk is an activity that has to be carried out under a framework full of uncertainty. The source of this uncertainty may be ascribed to the involvement of different, and often rather complex models and tools, in the context of environmental conditions that are at best, partially understood (Hall, 2014). In addition to this, flooding systems are dynamic over a range of timescales, due to for example climate variability and socio-economic changes, which further increases the uncertainty in the projections. Therefore, numerous types of uncertainty arise when using formal models in the analysis of risks.

Uncertainty is often categorised between aleatory and epistemic uncertainty (Hacking, 2006): aleatory is an essential, unavoidable unpredictability, and epistemic uncertainty reflects lack of knowledge or the inadequacy of the models to represent reality. In the context of any modelling framework, epistemic uncertainties may be ascribed to the definition of model parameters and to the model structure itself (limited knowledge).

In a technological era characterised by the advent of computers, there is an increased ability of more detailed hydrological and hydraulic models. Their use and development has been motivated as they are based on equations that have (more or less) physical justification; and allow a more detailed spatial representation of the processes, parameters and predicted variables (Beven, 2014). However, there are also disadvantages, these numerical tools take more computer time and require the spatio-temporal definition of initial, boundary conditions and parameter values. Generally, at a level of detail for which information is not available even in research studies. Moreover, these models may be subjetc to numerical problems such as numerical difussion and instability (Reeve et al., 2010). All of these disadvantages can be interpreted as sources of uncertainty in the modelling process.

Due to wide range of uncertainty sources in the flood risk assessment process, it is of great interest to investigate the propagation and behaviour of the different uncertainties, from the start of the modelling framework to the result. The size of registered damages and losses in recent events around the world, reveal the urgency of doing so, even under a context of limited predictability.

In September 2013, severe floods were registered in Mexico as a result of the exceptional simultaneous incidence of two tropical storms, culminating in serious damage and widespread persistent flooding (Pedrozo-Acuña et al., 2014). This unprecedented event is part of a recent set of extreme flood events over the last decade caused by record-breaking precipitation amounts across Central Europe (Becker and Grünewald, 2003), United Kingdom (Slingo et al., 2014), Pakistan (Webster et al., 2011), Australia (Ven den Honert and McAneney, 2011), Northeastern US (WMO, 2011), Japan (WMO, 2011) and Korea (WMO, 2011). In all cases, the immediate action of governments through the implementation of emergency and action plans was required. The main aim of these interventions was to reduce the duration and impact of floods. In addition, risk reduction measures were designed to ensure both a better flood management and an increase in infrastructure resilience.

One key piece of information in preventing and reducing losses is given by reliable flood inundation maps that enable the dissemination of flood risk to the society and decision-makers (Pedrozo-Acuña et al., 2013). Traditionally, this task requires the estimation of different return periods for discharge (Ward et al., 2011) and their propagation to the floodplain by means of a hydrodynamic model. There is currently a large range of models that can be used to develop flood hazard maps (Horrit and Bates, 2002; Horrit et al., 2006).

The aforementioned accelerated progress of computers has given way to the development of model cascades to produce hydrological forecasts, which make use of rainfall predictions from regional climate models (RCMs) with sufficient resolution to capture meteorological events (Bartholomes and Todini, 2005; Demerrit et al., 2010). Within this approach, the coupling of different operational numerical models is carried out, using numerical weather prediction (NWP) with radar data for hydrologic forecast purposes (Liguori and Rico-Ramirez, 2012; Liguori et al., 2012), or NWP with hydrological and hydrodynamic models to determine inundation extension (Pappenberger et al., 2012; Cloke et al., 2013; Ushiyama et al., 2014).

The use of RCMs in climate impact studies on flooding has been reported by Teutschbein and Seibert (2010) and Beven (2011), noting that despite their usefulness, the spatial resolution of models (~25km) remains coarse to capture the spatial resolution of precipitation. This is particularly important, as higher resolution is needed to effectively model the hydrological processes essential for determining flood risk. To overcome this limitation, the utilisation of dynamic downscaling in these models has been significantly growing (Fowler et al., 2007; Leung and Qian, 2009; Lo et al., 2008).

Significant challenges remain in the foreseeable future, among these, the inherent uncertainties in the predictive models are likely to have an important role to play. For example, it is well known that the performance skill of NWPs deteriorates very rapidly with time (Lo et al., 2008). To overcome this, the long-term continuous integration of the prediction has been subdivided into short-simulations, involving the re-initialisation of the model to mitigate the problem of systematic error growth in long integrations (Giorgi, 1990; Giorgi, 2006; Qian et al., 2003). Moreover, the use of ensemble prediction systems to obtain rainfall predictions for hydrological forecasts at the catchment scale is becoming more common among the hydrological community as they enable the evaluation and quantification of some uncertainties in the results (Buizza 2008; Cloke and Pappenberger, 2009; Bartholmes et al. 2009). In these studies, an ensemble is a collection of forecasts made from almost, but not quite, identical initial conditions.

A key question that arises when using a cascade modelling approach to flood prediction or mapping is: how uncertainties associated to meteorological predictions of precipitation propagate to a given flood inundation map? Previous work has been devoted to the examination of uncertainties in the results derived from different ensemble methods, which address differences in the initial conditions in the NWP or even differences in using a single model ensemble vs. multi-model ensemble (Pappenberger et al. 2008; Cloke et al., 2013; Ye et al., 2014). However, less attention has been paid to the behaviour of errors within a model chain that aims to represent a flood event occurring at several spatial scales. In order to understand how errors propagate in a chain of models, this investigation evaluates the transmission of uncertainties from the meteorological model to a given flood map. For this, we utilize a cascade modelling approach comprised by a Numerical Weather Prediction Model (NWP), a rainfall-runoff model and a standard 2D hydrodynamic model. This numerical framework is applied to an observed extreme event registered in Mexico in 2009 for which satellite imagery is available. The investigated uncertainty is limited to the model parameter definition in the NWP model, by means of a multi-physics ensemble technique considering several multi-physics parameterization schemes for the precipitation (Bukosvky and Karoly, 2009). The resulting precipitation fields are used to generate spaghetti plots by means of a distributed hydrological model, enabling the propagation of meteorological uncertainties to the flood hydrograph. Hence, the resulting hydrographs represent the runoff associated to each precipitation field estimated with the NWP model. In order to complete the propagation of the hydro-meteorological uncertainty through the cascade of models to the flood map, the hydrographs are used as forcing in a standard 2D hydrodynamic model.

On the other hand, it is acknowledged that each of the other models (hydrological and hydrodynamic) within the model cascade, will introduce other epistemic and random uncertainties to the result. In order to reduce their influence, the numerical setup of both these models is constructed with the best available data (e.g. LiDAR for the topography) and following recent guidelines for the assessment of uncertainty in flood risk mapping (Beven et al. 2011). In this way, the uncertainty associated to the meteorological model outputs is propagated through the model cascade from the atmosphere to the flood plain. Thus, the aim of this investigation is to study the uncertainty propagation from the meteorological model (due to multi-physics parameters), to the determination of an affected area impacted by a well-documented hydro-meteorological event.

This work is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a description of both, the study area and the extreme hydro-meteorological event, which are employed to test our cascade modelling approach; Section 3 introduces the methodology, incorporating a brief description of the selected models setup. Additionally, we incorporate a description of the multi-physics ensemble technique used to quantify and limit the epistemic uncertainty in the NWP model. The resulting precipitation fields, hydrographs and flood maps are compared with available field data and satellite imagery for the event. In Section 4, a discussion of errors along the model cascade, is also presented with some conclusions and future work.

2 Case Study

The selected study area is within the Mexican state of Tabasco, which in recent years has been subjected to severe flooding as reported by Pedrozo-Acuña et al. (2011; 2012). This region comprises the area of Mexico with the highest precipitation rate (2000-3000 mm/year), which mostly occurs during the wet season of the year between May and December. The rainfall climatology is also influenced by the incidence of hurricanes and tropical storms arriving from the North.

In this paper, the extreme hydro-meteorological event selected for the analysis corresponds to that registered in the early days of November 2009 in the Tonalá river. As it is shown in Fig.1, the river is located in the border of Tabasco and Veracruz and during the event, the substantial rainfall intensity provoked its overflowing leaving extensive inundated areas along its floodplain. Top panel of Fig. 1 shows the geographical location of the catchment, with an area of 5,021 km^2, as well as the location of 18 weather stations installed within the region by the National Weather Service. The event was the result of heavy rain induced by the cold front #9, which persisted for four days along Mexico's Gulf Coast, forcing more than 44,000 people to evacuate their homes and affecting more than 90 communities. High intensities in rainfall were recorded in rain gauges from the 31st October to 3rd November, with cumulative daily precipitation values reporting more than 270 mm. The river is approximately 300 km long and before discharging into the Gulf of Mexico, the stream receives additional streamflow from other smaller streams such as Agua Dulcita in Veracruz, and Chicozapote in Tabasco. The bottom panel of the same Figure illustrates the lower Tonalá River, where severe flooding was registered as it is shown in the photographs on the right. The yellow, blue and red dots on the panel represent the location at which the photographs were taken.

The hydrometric data in combination with the satellite imagery for the characterisation of the affected areas, enabled an accurate investigation of the causes and consequences that generated this flood event. The high quality of the available information, allowed the application of a cascade modelling approach comprised by state-of-the-art meteorological, hydrological and hydrodynamic models. This numerical approach is utilised with the intention to carry out an assessment of the modelling framework, with particular emphasis on the propagation of the epistemic uncertainty from the meteorological model to the spatial extent of an affected area. Such investigation paves the road towards a more honest knowledge transfer to decision-makers, whom consider the reliability of the model results.

3 Methodology and Results

The methodology is comprised of a Numerical Weather Prediction Model (NWP), a distributed rainfall-runoff model and a standard 2D hydrodynamic model. It is anticipated that the selected modelling approach will support the advance of the understanding of the connections among scales, intensities, causative factors, and impacts of extremes. This model cascade with state-of-the-art numerical tools representing a hydrological system, enables the development of a framework by which an identification of the reliability of simulations can be undertaken. This framework is utilised to explore the propagation of epistemic uncertainties from the estimation of precipitation in the atmosphere to the identification of a flooded area. Therefore, the aim is not to reproduce an observed extreme event, but to investigate the effects of errors in rainfall prediction by a NWP on inundation areas.

The proposed investigation is important as uncertainties are cascaded through the modelling framework, in order to provide better understanding on how errors propagate within models working at different temporal and spatial scales. It is acknowledged that this information would enhance better flood management strategies, which would be based on the honest and transparent communication of the results produced by a modelling system constrained by intrinsic errors and uncertainties.

The NWP model was implemented in a small computer cluster equipped with 64 processors, where six simultaneous model runs were performed (simulating 16 days of the event). This process took 12 hours per batch (24 hours for all members). The hydrologic and hydrodynamic models were run in a standard PC with an Intel® i7 processor 16Gb RAM, where the first model took only few seconds to run per member, and the hydrodynamic model took 8 hours per member.

3.1 Meteorological model

Simulated precipitation products from numerical weather prediction systems (NWPs) typically show differences in their spatial and temporal distribution. These differences can considerably influence the ability to predict hydrological responses. In this sense, in this study we utilise the advanced research core of the Weather Research and Forecasting (WRF) model Version 3.2. The WRF model is a fully compressible non-hydrostatic, primitive-equation model with multiple nesting capabilities (Skamarock et al., 2008).

As it is shown in **Fig. 2**, the model setup is defined using an interactive nested domain inside the parent domain. This domain is selected in order to simulate more realistic rainfall, with the inner frame enclosing the Tonalá river catchment within a 4 km resolution. The 4 km horizontal resolution is considered good enough to compute a mesoscale cloud system associated to a cold front. It is shown that this finer grid covers the central region of Mexico, while in the vertical dimension, 28 unevenly spaced sigma levels were selected. The initial and boundary conditions were created from the NCEP Global Final Analysis (FNL) with a time interval of 6 hours for the initial and boundary conditions. Each of the model simulations was reinitialised every two days at 1200 UTC, considering a total simulation time from the 27th October 2009 until the 13th November 2009.

Epistemic uncertainty is considered in the WRF model by means of the sensitivity of the results for precipitation, due to variations in the model setup. For this, we utilise a multi-physics ensemble technique proposed by Bukovsky and Karoly (2009), where the sensitivity of simulated precipitation in the model results is examined with twelve different parameterisation schemes. The comparison of computed precipitation fields against real measurements from weather stations within the catchment, enabled the quantification of uncertainty in the meteorological model for this event. It should be noted that different sources of errors are also associated to observations with rain gauges. However, these errors are mostly ascribed to the quantification of the spatial variability of rainfall (Morin et al., 2006; Yilmaz et al., 2005), resulting in underestimation of the true rainfall. However, the influence of these errors is limited on rainfall intensity estimates (Molini et al., 2005),

Table 1 shows a summary of the different multi-physics parameters used in the WRF model to generate the physics ensemble. In this approach, the multi-physics ensemble runs of the model represent a plausible and equally likely state of the system in the future.

Fig. 3 illustrates the cumulative precipitation fields computed for each of the 12 selected members of the multi-physics ensemble, where differences in the spatial distribution and intensity of precipitation were evident. These results suggested that for this event, the precipitation field estimated with the WRF was highly sensitive to the selection of multi-physics parameters. To revise in more detail the performance of the WRF in reproducing this hydro-meteorological event, the estimated cumulative precipitation by each member of the multi-physics ensemble was compared against measurements at the eighteen weather stations located within and close to the Tonalá catchment.

Table 2 presents a summary of the most well-known error metrics calculated at each weather station and for each member of the ensemble. Among these are the: Normalised Root-Mean Square Error (NRMSE), BIAS, Nash-Sutcliffe Coefficient (NSC), and the Correlation coefficient (Cor). The columns show the local value of each coefficient for a given member of the ensemble (M1, …, M12). As shown in all columns (i.e. member runs), the error metrics have a great spatial variability, hence, indicating the regions of the study area where the model performs better. To illustrate the performance of this ensemble technique at each weather station, the ensemble average of these error metrics is introduced in the last column and indicated by < >. Again, the spatial variability of the metrics is evident. The two bottom rows in each sub-table correspond to the average of the ensemble averages for the whole catchment and for the all the stations. It is shown, that when the average of all stations is taken into account, the skill decreases. However, in this investigation the error that is of interest is the one corresponding to the average of those weather stations located within the catchment, as these will be used as input in the hydrological model. This will enable the propagation of errors in the meteorological model within the model cascade. For clarity, in the same table the stations within the catchment are highlighted in blue.

Additionally, results per station are also illustrated for four different cases and are presented in **Fig. 4**, and they confirmed that the range of spatial uncertainty in the WRF predictions is high and variable. To give an example, at Station No. 27075, the spread of the estimated cumulative precipitation curves is limited and quantified by a NSC=0.917 and a NRMSE = 10.7%, indicating a good skill of the WRF precipitation estimates at this point. In contrast, at Station No. 27007 the spread of the cumulative precipitation is large and characterised by a NSC=0.766 and a NRMSE=19.4%, showing less skill in the model performance than that observed in the previous case. The observed differences of estimated precipitation for this event, highlight the importance of incorporating ensemble techniques in the reproduction of precipitation with this type of models.

A question that has been seldom explored in the literature, is how the uncertainty in the prediction of the precipitation (i.e. errors described in this section), cascade into an estimated flood hydrograph determined by a distributed hydrological model. In this sense, the next step in this work, considers the non-linear transfer of rainfall to runoff using a distributed rainfall-runoff model. For this, we employ each one of the 12 precipitation fields derived from the WRF as input to determine the associated river discharge with the hydrological model.

3.2 Hydrological model

The hydrological model used in this study was applied to the Tonalá River catchment in an early work presented by Rodríguez-Rincón et al. (2012). This numerical tool was developed by the Institute of Engineering – UNAM (Domínguez-Mora et al., 2008), and comprises a simplified grid-based distributed rainfall–runoff model. The model has been previously applied with success in other catchments in Mexico (e.g. Pedrozo-Acuña et al., 2014).

This paper only describes an overview and key components of the hydrologic model. Interested readers can find detailed descriptions in Domínguez-Mora et al. (2008). The model is based on the method of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) with a modification that allows the consideration of soil moisture accounting before and after rainfall events. The parameters that are needed for the definition of a runoff curve number within the catchment are the hydrological soil group, land use, pedology and the river drainage network. **Fig. 5** shows for the Tonalá River catchment, the spatial definition of the river network (center panels) and the runoff curve (right panels). The model is forced with the precipitation calculated from the WRF considering the 12 members of the multi-physics ensemble.

It is well known that both the amount and distribution of rainfall can significantly affect the final estimated river discharge (Ferraris et al. 2002; De Roo et al., 2003; Cluckie et al., 2004). In consequence, the propagation of meteorological uncertainty to the rainfall-runoff model is carried out using WRF rainfall precipitation ensembles as an input in the hydrological model. For this purpose, free-parameters in the hydrologic model are fixed, assuming that the selected parameters are the best at representing the physical conditions of the catchment for this event. The selection of these parameters is carried out following the results presented by Rodríguez-Rincón et al. (2012) for the same catchment. For the numerical setup of the hydrological model, we employ topographic information from a LiDAR data set, from which a 10m resolution Digital Elevation Model (DEM) is constructed.

Fig. 6 illustrates for the Tonalá River catchment the spaghetti plot of hydrographs computed for this event, these are shown along with the measured discharge by a streamflow gauge. The uncertainty bounds illustrated by the grey shaded area indicate that errors in the predicted rainfall are indeed propagated to the hydrological model, which uses a finer spatial resolution (1 km). It has been established that, in some cases, an error in the meteorological model can be compensated by an error in the hydrological model and vice-versa. To illustrate this in more detail, **Table 3** presents a summary of the error metrics for the hydrographs shown in **Fig. 6**. It is shown that on average (last column in the Table) the hydrological model has a NSC=0.84, Cor=0.96, BIAS=1.01 and NRMSE=38.12%. Differences between members of the multi-physics ensemble are also illustrated at this stage, especially by the NSC. For instance, member M11 indicates a NSC=0.68 showing poor skill at reproducing the river discharge with the precipitation derived from this member, in contrast member M3 has a greater skill with NSC=0.93. The change in the values of the NSC indicates that results from the regional weather model can be enhanced or weakened by the performance of the hydrological model.

The use of these hydrographs in a 2D hydrodynamic model, enables the study of the propagation of errors within the cascade of models. In particular, for estimating the flood extent during this extreme event.

3.3 Flood inundation model

Several 2D hydrodynamic models have been developed for simulating extreme flood events. However, any model is only as good as the data used to parameterise, calibrate and validate the model. 2D models have been regarded as suitable for simulating problems where inundation extent changes dynamically through time as they can easily represent moving boundary effects (e.g. Bates and Horritt, 2005). The use of these numerical tools has become common place when flows produce a large areal extent, compared to their depth and where there are large lateral variations in the velocity field (Hunter et al., 2008).

In this study, given the size of the study area the modelling system utilised is comprised by the flow model of MIKE 21 flexible mesh (FM). This numerical model solves the two dimensional Reynolds-averaged Navier–Stokes equations invoking the approximations of Boussinesq and hydrostatic pressure (for details see DHI, 2014). The equations are solved at the centre of each element in the model domain.

The numerical setup is based on a previous work on the study area (Pedrozo-Acuña et al. 2012), with selected resolutions for the elements of the mesh with a size that guarantees the proper assimilation of a 10 m DEM to characterise the elevation in the floodplain. The topographic data has been regarded as the most important factor in determining water surface elevations, base flood elevation, and the extent of flooding and, thus, the accuracy of flood maps in riverine areas (NRC, 2009). Therefore, the elevation data used in this study corresponds to LiDAR data provided by INEGI (2008). The hydraulic roughness in the floodplain is assumed to be uniform and different from the main river channel, in this sense two values for the Manning number are used, one for the main river channel (M=32 $m^{1/2}s^{-1}$)

and another for the floodplain (M=28 $m^{1/2}s^{-1}$). The choice of a 10-m DEM is based on recommendations put forward by the Committee on Floodplain Mapping Technologies, NRC (2007) and Prinos et al. (2008), as such a DEM ensures both accuracy and detail of the ground surface. The model domain is illustrated in **Fig. 7**, along with the numerical mesh and elevation data, it comprises the lower basin of the Tonalá River and additional main water bodies. The colours represent the magnitude of the elevation and bathymetric data assimilated in the numerical mesh, where warm colours identify high ground areas and light blues represent bathymetric data. The numerical mesh considers three boundary conditions represented in the Figure by dots as follows: where the input hydrograph from the rainfall-runoff model is set (red dot); the Tonalá's river mouth, where the astronomical tide occurs for the period of the event (27th October – 12th November 2009) (yellow dot) and the Agua Dulcita river set where a constant discharge of 100 m^3/s is introduced (blue dot).

It is acknowledged that topographic information is key for the reduction of uncertainty in flood hazard mapping. Therefore, in order to minimise this source of error, the integration of high quality topographic information in a 2D model with enough spatial resolution, will enable the investigation of the propagation of the meteorological uncertainty to the determination of the flood extent.

Fig. 8a introduces the result of the hydrodynamic simulation for each of the 12 hydrographs, which resulted from the utilisation of the rainfall-runoff model using as input the WRF multi-physics ensemble output. The illustrated flood map summarises the 12 different possibilities of the inundation area that could result from the characterisation of precipitation with the WRF model. Differences in the size of these areas, illustrate the propagation of epistemic errors from the meteorological model to the flood map. In this sense, the analysis of uncertainty has been restricted to its propagation along the model chain (atmosphere-catchment-river floodplain). Each of these flood maps can also be associated to a probability enabling the representation of a probabilistic flood map, shown in the figure. This allows the identification of the areas highly vulnerable to flooding from this event. Additionally, **Fig. 8b** introduces the infrared SPOT satellite image of the 12th of November 2009, which is used for comparison against the produced flood maps using all the ensemble members. Notably, in the numerical results, the blue area identifies the region of the domain that is most likely to be flooded (90%), the comparison of this area with the observed inundation in the satellite image, show a good skill of the model chain at reproducing the registered flood in the study area.

To better quantify the performance of each of the model runs in reproducing the observed flood extent, the estimation of several error metrics in these results was also performed, among these are: BIAS, False Alarm Ratio (FAR), Probability of Detection (POD), Probability of False Detection (POFD), Critical Success Index (CSI) and the True Skill Statistics (TSS). **Table 4** introduces the results by member and metric. Clearly, there is some variability in the performance of the model for each of the ensemble members, showing that there has been some propagation of the error to the flood map. The ensemble average of these quantities is also illustrated in the last column of the table, where a BIAS=0.964, FAR=0.453, POD=0.799, POFD=0.154; CSI=0.831 and TSS=0.645 are reported. These results indicate a good skill of the model chain at reproducing the flood extension, due to the incidence of this extreme event.

Current approaches to inundation prediction, have pointed out that in order to produce a scientifically justifiable flood map, the most physically-realistic model should be utilised (Di Baldassarre et al., 2010). Nevertheless, even with these models the amount of uncertainty involved in the determination of an affected area is important and should be quantified.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

It has been largely acknowledged in the literature, that flood risk mapping and assessment are highly difficult tasks due to the inherent complexity of the relevant processes, which occur in several spatial and temporal scales. As pointed out by Aronica et al. (2013), the process is subject to substantial uncertainties (epistemic and random), which emerge from different sources and assumptions, from the statistical analysis of extreme events and from the resolution and accuracy of the DEM used in a flood inundation model.

By acknowledging that all models are an imperfect representation of the reality, it is important to quantify the impact of epistemic uncertainties on a given result. The numerical approach utilised in this investigation enabled an assessment of a state-of-the art modelling framework, comprised by meteorological, hydrological and hydrodynamic models. Emphasis was given to the effects of epistemic uncertainty propagation from the meteorological model to the definition of an affected area in a 2D domain. Ensemble climate simulations have become a common practice in order to provide a metric of the uncertainty associated with climate predictions. In this study, a multi-physics ensemble technique is utilised to evaluate the propagation of epistemic uncertainties within a model chain. Therefore, the assessment of hydro-meteorological model performance at the three stages is carried out through the estimation of skill scores.

Fig. 9 presents a summary of the propagation of two well-known error metrics, BIAS (top panel) and NSC/TSS (bottom panel). These metrics are selected, as they enable a direct comparison of their values at each of the stages within the model cascade. In both metrics, the evolution of the confidence limits is illustrated by the size of the bars. Their evolution from the meteorological model to the hydrological model results, show a clear decrease in both cases. This result may point towards an enhancement of meteorological uncertainties in the rainfall-runoff model. However, the skill of the hydrological model is considerably improved from a mean value of 0.65 in the meteorological model, to 0.834. In the last stage of the model chain, the confidence limits of the results at the hydrodynamic model results, show a small improvement. Nevertheless, the mean value of the skill is reduced to TSS=0.645. The results provide a useful way to evaluate the hydro-meteorological uncertainty propagation within the whole modelling system.

BIAS and NSC/TSS error metrics (**Fig. 9**) revealed discrepancies between observations and simulations throughout the model cascade. For instance, an increase in the NSC from the rainfall to the flood hydrograph has a double implication: first, it implies that the hydrological model is more sensitive (wider uncertainty bars) to its main input (precipitation) than the WRF model is to the set of micro-physics parameterisations. Second, despite such large amount of uncertainty, the ensemble of flood hydrographs is closer to the reality (high NSC) than the ensemble of hyetographs provided by the NWP model. On the other side, it implies that the hydrological model used in this study is quite sensitive to climatic forcing. Such attenuation in the error could be explained by the fact that the mean flood hydrograph obtained from the ensemble members is quite close to the measured hydrograph as shown in **Fig. 6**. This type of error and uncertainty propagation within the first step in the model cascade (a simultaneous rise in the model accuracy and uncertainty), suggests that the error in the hydrological model is reduced as a consequence of the non-linear rainfall-runoff transfer in the watershed. Whereas the error reached in the meteorological model may reflect a spatial scaling issue (comparing observations from rain gauges to simulations at the meso-scale) and thus widening the gap.

The propagation of uncertainty and error from the hydrological model to the inundation area reveals a reduction in the uncertainty but also an increase in the error. This last modelling step is quite important given the consequences for issuing warning alerts to the population at risk. This work shows that the estimated inundation extent is strongly insensitive to the input flood hydrograph. While this can be explained by the limited effect that the volume overflowing the riverbanks and reaching the floodplain will have on the maximum inundation area, the difference between the observed and ensemble of the flooded area remains important (TSS=0.65).

It should be pointed out, that this methodology contains more uncertainties that were not considered or quantified in the generation of flood extent maps for this event. To quantify the epistemic uncertainty in the larger scale (i.e. atmosphere), a mesoscale numerical weather prediction system was used along with a multi-physics ensemble. The ensemble was designed to represent our limited knowledge of the processes generating precipitation in the lower troposphere. It was shown that a large amount of uncertainty exists in the NWP model, and this is indeed propagated over the catchment and floodplain scales. Members of the ensemble were shown to differ significantly in terms of cumulative precipitation, its spatial distribution, river discharge and the size of the affected area by the event. Therefore, epistemic uncertainties from each step in the hazard analysis chain can be accumulated in the final outputs.

The evaluation of the skill in the model cascade shows further potential for improvements of the model system. Consequently, future work is planned to include the remaining uncertainties as adopted by, e.g. Pedrozo-Acuña et al. (2013). Special attention should be paid to the interaction between hydro-meteorological uncertainty and hydrological uncertainty. The assessment of the error propagation within the model cascade is seen as a good step forward, in the communication of uncertain results to the society. However, as shown in this work, an improvement in model prediction during the first cascade step (rainfall to runoff) can be reverted during the second cascade step (runoff to inundation area) with important consequences for early warning systems and operational forecasting purposes. Finally, the proposed numerical framework could be utilised as a robust alternative for the characterisation of extreme events in ungauged basins.

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