Sensitivity and identifiability of rheological parameters in debris flow modeling

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Abstract.

Over the past decades, several numerical models have been developed to understand, simulate and predict debris flow events. Typically, these models simplify the complex interactions between water and solids using a single-phase approach and different rheological models to represent flow resistance. In this study, we perform a sensitivity analysis on the parameters of a debris flow numerical model (FLO-2D) for a suite of relevant variables (i.e., maximum flood area, maximum flow velocity, maximum height, deposit volume). Our aims are to (i) examine the degree of model overparameterization, and (ii) assess the effectiveness of observational constraints to improve parameter identifiability. We use the Distributed Evaluation of Local Sensitivity Analysis (DELSA) method, which is a hybrid local-global technique. Specifically, we analyze two creeks in northern Chile (29° S, 70° W) that were affected by debris flows on March 25, 2015. Our results show that SD and β_1 - a parameter related to viscosity - provide the largest sensitivities. Further, our results demonstrate that equifinality is present in FLO-2D, and that the final deposited volume and maximum flood area contain considerable information to identify model parameters.

1 Introduction

In steep mountain environments, intense and localized storms can trigger the sudden movement of sediments, generating flash floods with solid volumetric concentrations up to 40 - 60 % (Takahashi, 1981; O'Brien and Julien, 1988; Calvo and Savi, 2009). These events, also known as debris flows, differ from water floods because - in addition to fluid stress - solid-fluid and solid-solid interactions dominate the flow motion (Takahashi, 1981; Iverson et al., 1997). In recent years, debris flows have been recognized as a major natural hazard (Calvo and Savi, 2009), affecting infrastructure, economic activities and human life. For instance, debris flows events in Switzerland produced 24 fatalities and overall losses of US $ 380 MM during the period 1972 - 2007 (Hilker et al., 2009). In Chile, estimated economic losses associated with the five biggest debris flow events recorded over 1980-2017, were at least US $ 1.600 MM, with nearly 1,000 people dead or missing (Servicio Nacional de Geología y Minería, 2017).

Over the last decades, numerical models have emerged as a powerful tool to understand the behaviour and magnitude of debris flow events, since they allow the quantification of key variables used by engineers and decision-makers for risk management (Quan Luna et al., 2011; Frey et al., 2016; Calvo and Savi, 2009) and urban planning (Hürlimann et al., 2006;

25 Lucà et al., 2014; Naef et al., 2006; Arattano et al., 2006). However, the application of debris flow models requires several assumptions and simplifications that make results diverge from reality at various levels (Sosio et al., 2007). For example, uncertainties in terrain elevation models (e.g., satellite product, horizontal resolution), physical parameters (e.g., rheology parameters, solid concentration), and hydrological fluxes (e.g., precipitation, streamflow) used to force debris flow simulations can substantially impact relevant variables, such as flood area, sediment volumes, or maximum flow depth.

30 The use of debris flow models for practical problems typically requires the implementation of single-phase numerical models (Rickenmann et al., 2006; Naef et al., 2006) that solve 1D or 2D Saint Venant equations, using different rheological approaches to account for frictional stress (S_f). Many studies have reported good agreement between debris-flow model results and post-event measurements - e.g., run-out distance, flow velocity, deposit depth, flood area (D'Agostino and Tecca, 2006; Naef et al., 2006; Sosio et al., 2007; Rickenmann et al., 2006; Cesca and D'Agostino, 2008; Lin et al., 2011; Hungr, 1995). Nevertheless,
35 it is recognized that, because complex debris flow dynamics change in time and space (Coussot and Meunier, 1996), the appropriate choice of rheological parameters is critical for a good agreement between debris flow model output and field data (Sosio et al., 2007). In this context, various approaches have been adopted to characterize the sensitivity of debris flow model results to variations in model parameters - i.e., the coefficients in the model equations. For example, D'Agostino and Tecca (2006) compared FLO-2D (O'Brien and Garcia, 2009) simulations performed with two sets of rheological parameters
40 and three values of the laminar coefficient K (6 simulations in total), concluding that K controls the flood area and that rheological parameters control the maximum depth. Boniello et al. (2010) compared FLO-2D model results from a set of 12 back-calculated rheological parameters selected from previous studies, with another set of parameter values obtained from laboratory rheological analyses, finding a better representation of debris flow behavior with back-calculated parameters. Chow et al. (2018) conducted simulations with FLO 2D using 26 different sets of rheological parameters obtained from previous
45 studies, combined with different values of volumetric sediment concentration C_v, specific gravity G_s and the surface detention SD, a parameter used in FLO2D to represent flow detention. They found that the most important parameters were C_v, SD and β_1, which characterizes fluid viscosity. All these studies used fixed sets of rheological parameters in their numerical experiments and, therefore, the relative importance of such coefficients on relevant simulated variables - specifically, flow depth, flow velocity, deposit volume, and flood area - remains unknown. Therefore, this paper addresses the following questions:

50 1. How sensitive are debris flow model results to uncertain - and typically fixed - rheological parameters?

   2. What are the most effective post-event measurements to constrain the parameter search towards more realistic simulations?

To answer these questions, we perform a sensitivity analysis on the parameters of a numerical debris flow model, and examine the effects of using post-event in-situ measurements on expected parameter ranges. In particular, we analyze a debris
55 flow event that occurred in two creeks located in the Atacama region (northern Chile; 29°S, 70°W) during March 2015. This event was the consequence of heavy precipitation over a three-day period, which exceeded 60 mm at several locations (Bozkurt et al., 2016), producing loss of human lives and massive infrastructure damage. Therefore, our intention is to provide guidance on the choice of uncertain rheological parameters, contributing to more reliable numerical simulations for debris flow risk

assessments and land use planning. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the case study
creeks and data, Section 3 describes the numerical debris flow model, sensitivity analysis and parameter search strategies;
Section 4 presents the results and discussion, and Section 5 summarizes our main findings.

2 Study domain and data

We choose two nearly located ephemeral creeks in the upper Huasco River basin, Acerillas and La Mesilla (Fig. 1 (a)), where
debris flows were triggered by an extreme precipitation event on March 24-26, 2015 (Bozkurt et al., 2016; Ortega et al., 2019).
The Huasco Valley is a semi-arid fluvial system located at the southern edge of the Atacama region, Chile. This valley is
characterized by perennial rivers that only exist in the trunk valleys, while tributaries only show ephemeral streams. In these
areas, heavy rainfall events may induce catastrophic debris flows and mud-floods that greatly contribute to erosion (Aguilar
et al., 2020).

The Acerillas creek (15 km^2 basin area, Figure 1 (b)) has a markedly narrow channel with almost none alluvial fan, allowing
the transportation of sediments towards the El Carmen River. Post-event measurements indicate a deposited sediment volume
of 6.000 m^3 (Cabré et al., 2020) and a maximum flood area of 37.000 m^2. Conversely, the La Mesilla creek (2,5 km^2 basin
area, Figure 1 (c)) is characterized by a big alluvial fan where considerable sedimentation occurs, and post-event measurements
show a deposited sediment volume of 102.000 m^3 (Cabré et al., 2020) and a maximum flood area of 246.500 m^2. These flood
areas were estimated by comparing pre- and post-event satellite Google Earth imagery. Also, a post-event topography lidar
scan (acquired in Feb-March 2017 by the Chilean Ministry of Public Works) was available for this study. This dataset has a
$1x1\,m^2$ horizontal resolution, and was post-processed in order to eliminate vegetation and buildings.

Flow discharge data at the outlet of each creek were obtained from a distributed hydrological model, HEC-HMS version 4.2
(USACE, 2015). The model was configured for the entire Huasco River basin (7242 km^2), upstream the Santa Juana irrigation
reservoir, as part of a debris flow mitigation project for the Chilean Ministry of Public Works. Hydrologic model simulations
were forced using data from point measurements at 14 meteorological stations, spatially distributed with the inverse distance
weighting (IDW) interpolation method (Teegavarapu et al., 2006). Total rainfall records range from 20 mm to 76 mm, with
a maximum registered intensity of $16\,mm\,hr^{-1}$. The HEC-HMS model parameters were calibrated against hourly streamflow
observed at two gauge stations located in the upper part of the basin - *Río El Carmen en El Corral* and *Río Conay en Las Lozas*
(Fig. 2) - obtaining a Nash-Sutcliffe efficiency (NSE; Nash and Sutcliffe, 1970) of 0.78 for the former and 0.64 for the latter.
Although all the other gauging stations were buried or destroyed by debris flows, simulated total water volumes were similar
with those captured by the Santa Juana Reservoir - whose levels were low before the event. Estimated peak flow discharges for
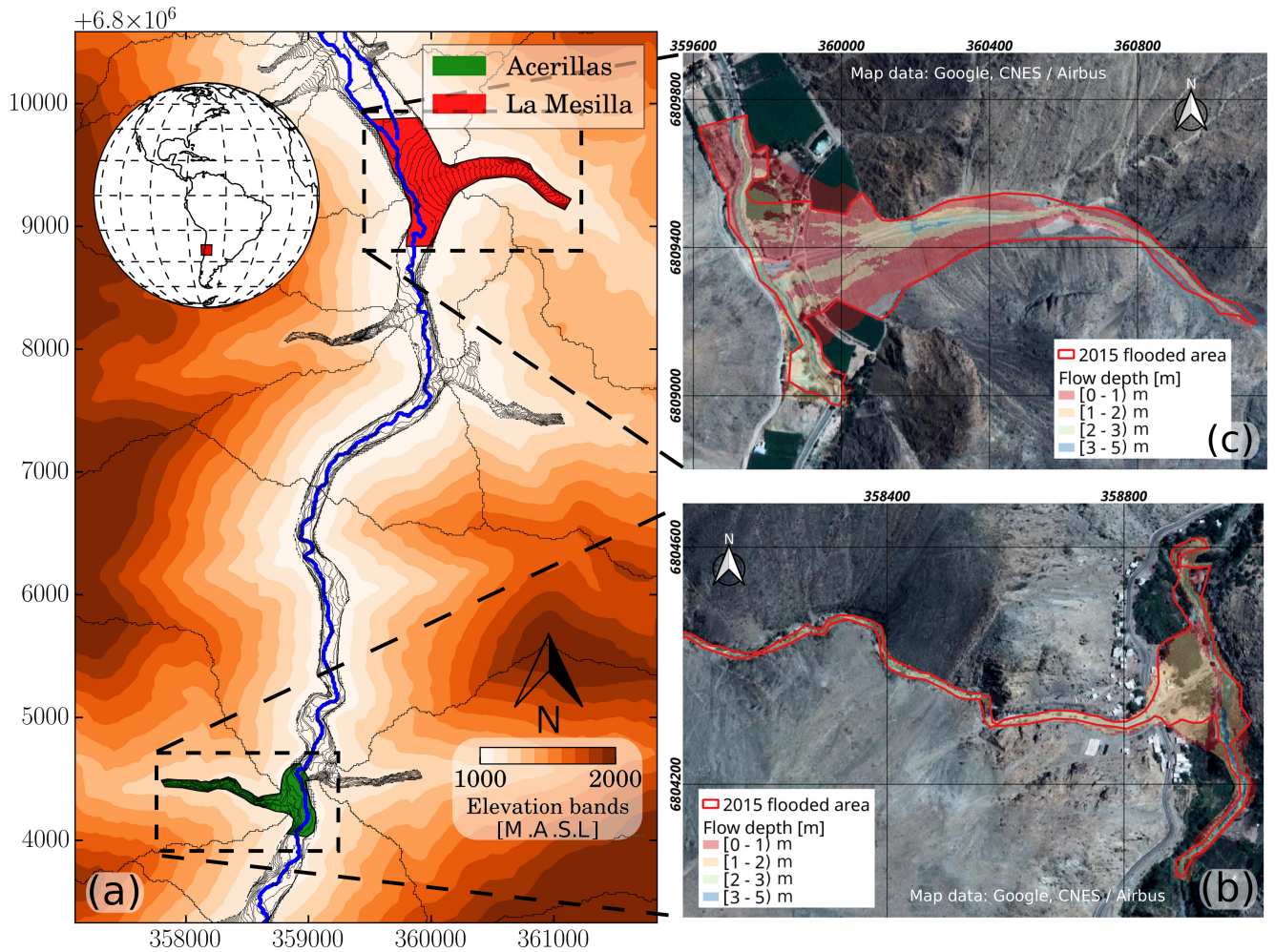the event analyzed are $8\,m^3\,s^{-1}$ at La Mesilla and $12.7\,m^3\,s^{-1}$ at Acerillas.

Figure 1. (a) Location of the two case study creeks and reference models results. The maximum observed flood areas and modeled flow depth (reference models) are shown for (b) Acerillas creek, and (c) La Mesilla creek. Elevations bands created from Satellite DEM 12 x 12 m: © JAXA/METI ALOS PALSAR L1.0 2007. Accessed through ASF DAAC 11 June 2017.

3   Methods

3.1   Debris flow model

90   We use the two-dimensional FLO-2D debris flow model (O'Brien et al., 1993), configured at a 10-m horizontal resolution. FLO-2D is a finite difference model that simulates water or debris flows in channels or unconfined surfaces. The governing equations solved by FLO-2D are the depth-averaged continuity and momentum conservation (Eqs. (1) and (2)), and the flood wave progression is controlled by topography and flow resistance (O'Brien and Julien, 1988). FLO-2D can also simulate debris-
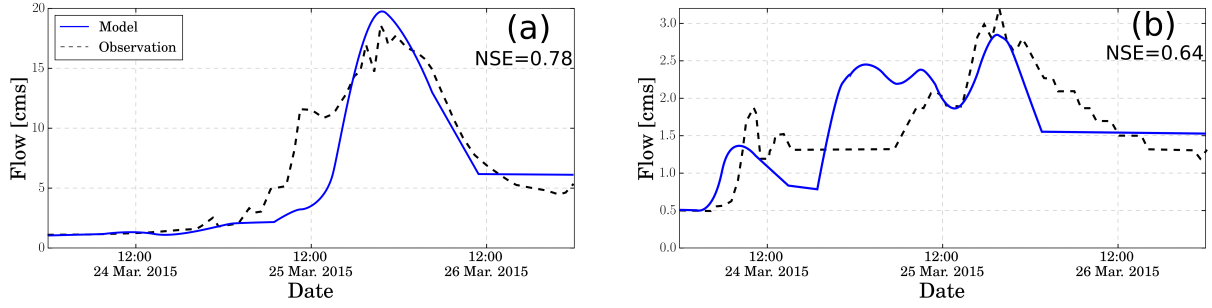
Figure 2. Calibration records for stream gauge stations (a) *Río El Carmen en El Corral* and (b) *Río Conay en Las Lozas*.

flows rheologies using a "quadratic" rheological model that combines components associated with creep, viscous, dispersive (collisions), and turbulent stresses (O'Brien and Julien, 1988; O'Brien and Garcia, 2009; Naef et al., 2006). Based on this quadratic rheology, the friction slope, S_f, is estimated as (Eq. (3)):

$$\frac{\partial h}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial hV_x}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial hV_y}{\partial y} = 0 \tag{1}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
S_{fx} &= S_{ox} - \frac{\partial h}{\partial x} - \frac{V_x}{g}\frac{\partial V_x}{\partial x} - \frac{V_y}{g}\frac{\partial V_x}{\partial y} - \frac{1}{g}\frac{\partial V_x}{\partial t} \\
S_{fy} &= S_{oy} - \frac{\partial h}{\partial y} - \frac{V_y}{g}\frac{\partial V_y}{\partial y} - \frac{V_x}{g}\frac{\partial V_y}{\partial x} - \frac{1}{g}\frac{\partial V_y}{\partial t}
\end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

$$S_f = \frac{\tau_y}{\gamma_m h} + \frac{K\eta V}{8\gamma_m h^2} + \frac{n_{td}^2 V^2}{h^{3/4}} \tag{3}$$

where h is the local flow depth, t is time, V_x and V_y are depth-averaged velocity components along the x and y directions, g is gravitational acceleration, S_f the friction slope, S_o is the bed slope, τ_y is the yield stress, K a laminar strength parameter, η the interstitial fluid dynamic viscosity, and n_{td} is the conventional Manning's roughness coefficient corrected by C_v ($n_{td} = 0.0538ne^{6.0896C_v}$ (O'Brien and Julien, 1988)). O'Brien et al. (1993) proposed the following empirical relationships to calculate the viscosity and yield stress as a function of the volumetric sediment concentration, c_v (Eqs. (4) and (5))

$$\eta = \alpha_1 e^{\beta_1 c_v} \tag{4}$$

$$\tau_y = \alpha_2 e^{\beta_2 c_v} \tag{5}$$

where $\alpha_{1,2}$ and $\beta_{1,2}$ are experimentally defined empirical coefficients (O'Brien et al., 1993; O'Brien and Garcia, 2009).

3.2 Sensitivity analysis

Sensitivity analysis (SA) is a powerful tool to characterize the effects of variations in input factors on environmental model responses (Razavi and Gupta, 2015; Gupta and Razavi, 2018). When the factors of interest are the model parameters, SA helps to identify those that are redundant for the modeling purposes, contributing to a more efficient parameter search (Mendoza et al., 2015). Different types of SA techniques have been proposed in the literature depending on specific objectives, or even the meaning of sensitivity (see, for example, reviews by Razavi and Gupta (2015); Pianosi et al. (2016)).

In this work, we apply the DELSA method (Rakovec et al., 2014) , which is a frugal local-global hybrid technique, to identify the parameters that have the largest impact on simulated debris flow variables. Although our implementation only examines first-order sensitivities across the parameter space - as in Rakovec et al. (2014) - it should be noted that DELSA has considerable unexplored potential to characterize parameter interactions, which could be achieved by including additional terms in the prediction total variance, as suggested by Sobol and Kucherenko (2010).

First order sensitivities are obtained using local gradients that quantify the sensitivity of a modeled output, Ψ, relative to individual variations of a parameter θ_j. The local gradients, $\frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial \theta_j}|_k$, are used to compute the first-order sensitivity of each parameter j at each point k of the parameter space:

$$S1_k^j = \frac{|\frac{\partial \Psi_{kj}}{\partial \theta_j}|^2 \frac{1}{12}(\theta_{i,max} - \theta_{i,min})^2}{V_K(\Psi)} \tag{6}$$

where $V_K(\Psi)$ is the total local variance at point k:

$$V_K(\Psi) = \sum_{j=0}^{J} |\frac{\partial \Psi_{kj}}{\partial \theta_j}|^2 \frac{1}{12}(\theta_{i,max} - \theta_{i,min})^2 \tag{7}$$

The first-order sensitivity measures, $S1_k^j$, vary between 0 and 1, and the sum of first-order sensitivities from all parameters is equal to 1 at each sample point. In this work, parameter sampling is performed using the Latin hypercube sampling (LHS) method. LHS is a statistical method to generate an almost random sample of parameter values from a multidimensional distribution, and has proven to be more efficient than other methods like Monte Carlo sampling (Olsson et al., 2003; Olsson and Sandberg, 2002).

Local sensitivities can be analyzed in a disaggregated manner - through their cumulative frequency distribution across the parameter space -, or aggregated by computing a specific statistical property - e.g., the median of all local sensitivity measures for a particular pair of parameter and target variable. We use both approaches to analyze SA results.

In this paper, we focus on the effects of debris flow model parameters on four response variables: maximum average runoff speed $V_{mean}\,m\,s^{-1}$, maximum average runoff height $H_{mean}\,m$, maximum flood area $A_{max}\,m^2$, and deposited volume $Vol_{dep}\,m^3$. These response variables are calculated using the outputs from FLO-2D as:

$$V_{mean} = \sum_{j=0}^{N_{WC}} V_{max}(j)/N_{WC} \tag{8}$$

$$H_{mean} = \sum_{j=0}^{N_{WC}} H_{max}(j)/N_{WC} \tag{9}$$

$$A_{max} = \sum_{j=0}^{N_{WC}} dx \cdot dy \tag{10}$$

$$Vol_{dep} = \sum_{j=0}^{N_{WC}} H_{final}(j)dx \cdot dy \tag{11}$$

where j is the cell index, N_{WC} is the total number of wet cells ($h > 0$), dx and dy indicate the cell size along the x and y axis (numerical grid); $V_{max}(j)$, $H_{max}(j)$ and $H_{final}(j)$ are the maximum flow speed, maximum flow depth and final runoff height of the cell j respectively

The FLO-2D parameters considered for DELSA are those that describe the fluid rheology (Table 1): $\alpha_{1,2}$, $\beta_{1,2}$, C_v, K, n, the SD parameter and the total volume of sediments mobilized Vol_T.

The detention coefficient SD is a model parameter that controls flow detention. The FLO-2D User's Manual and previous studies (D'Agostino and Tecca, 2006) suggest that SD acts as the minimum physically plausible flow depth (i.e., flow stops if flow depth < SD). Further, D'Agostino and Tecca (2006) noted that this coefficient has a strong influence on the results, and it can be used as a surrogate of the rheology. The total sediment volume mobilized (Vol_{Test}) by each debris flow event was estimated with the equation proposed by Chang et al. (2011) (Eq. (12)):

$$Vol_{Test} = 0.023A_w + 0.064A_L + 13264.6GI - 1399.2D + 38.47C_R \tag{12}$$

where A_w is the watershed area, A_L the landslide area (zero in these cases), GI the geological index (where a value of 2.5 is assumed based on a study zone report made for the Chilean Ministry of Public Works), D rainfall duration ($D = 48\,hours$ for this event) and C_R the cumulative rainfall ($C_R = 76\,mm$). We obtain Vol_{Test} values of $185000\,m^3$ for Acerillas and $154000\,m^3$ for La Mesilla.

Table 1. Values range of the model parameters.

Parameter	MIN	MAX	Units	Reference
α_1	0,00030	0,06480	$poises$	Sosio et al. (2007); O'Brien and Julien (1988)
β_1	6,20	33,10	-	O'Brien and Julien (1988)
α_2	0,00071	0,15200	$dynes\,cm^{-2}$	O'Brien and Julien (1988); D'Agostino and Tecca (2006)
β_2	16,90	29,80	-	O'Brien and Julien (1988)
Cv_{max}	0,45	0,60	-	Sosio et al. (2007); O'Brien and Julien (1988)
n	0,01	0,2	-	Rickenmann et al. (2006)
K	24	2000	-	O'Brien and Garcia (2009)
SD	0,1	1,5	-	O'Brien and Garcia (2009); D'Agostino and Tecca (2006)
Vol_T	70% Vol_{Test}	130% Vol_{Test}	m^3	Chang et al. (2011)
τ_y	153,6	35.000,0	$dynes\,cm^{-2}$	O'Brien and Julien (1988); Rickenmann et al. (2006)
η	1,1	100.000,0	$poises$	O'Brien and Julien (1988); Rickenmann et al. (2006)

155 Debris flow concentration is assumed to vary with streamflow between a minimum concentration $C_{vmin} = 0.1 - 0.4$ to a maximum concentration C_{vmax} at the time of peak flow, which is treated as a model parameter. To this end, we propose the following function for C_v:

$$C_v(t) = \begin{cases} \frac{(C_{vmax}-C_{vmin})\cdot erf((Q(t)-Q_m)/(Q_{max}-Q_m)\cdot\phi)\cdot(C_{vmax}-C_{vmin})}{((C_{vmax}-C_{vmin})\cdot erf((Q_{max}-Q_m)/(Q_{max}-Q_m)\cdot\phi))} + C_{vmin}, & \text{if } Q(t)/Q_{mean} \geq 0.5 \\ C_{vmin}, & \text{if } Q(t)/Q_{mean} < 0.5 \end{cases} \tag{13}$$

where ϕ is a coefficient that changes the shape of the concentration curve. ϕ and C_{vmin} are calculated in order to match the
160 total volume and minimize C_{vmin} value:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{minimize} \quad C_{vmin} \\ &\text{subject to} \quad \int_{t=0}^{T} C_v(t)\cdot Q(t)\cdot dt = Vol_T \end{aligned} \tag{14}$$

Rheological parameter ranges are obtained from previous debris-flow studies (O'Brien and Julien, 1988; Boniello et al., 2010; D'Agostino and Tecca, 2006; Sosio et al., 2007; Rickenmann et al., 2006; Chang et al., 2011; O'Brien and Garcia, 2009) and are summarized in Table 1. However, additional restrictions are imposed for τ_y and η, with maximum values of 35,000
165 $dynes\,cm^{-2}$ and 100,000 $poises$, respectively (Rickenmann et al., 2006). Since τ_y and η are function of rheological parameters (Eqs (5) and (4)), such limits impose restrictions for $\alpha_{1,2}$, $\beta_{1,2}$ and C_{vmax} that we ensure to implement in DELSA. To this end, we develop a Python script that allows running FLO-2D in parallel and sequentially, reducing computational cost considerably. For Vol_T, we assume a range of variation of $\pm 30\%$ respect to estimated values (Eq. (12)).

Table 2. Parameter values for reference models on (Zegers, 2017).

α_1	β_1	α_2	β_2	Cv_{max}	n	K	SD	Vol_T
poises	–	dynes cm^{-2}	–	–	–	–	–	m^3
0,0075	14,39	0,152	18,7	0,55	0,07 flood plains	2600	1	185.000 for Acerillas
					0,05 main channel			154.000 for La Mesilla

3.3 Parameter Selection via Constrained Search

170   We explore the effects of parameter uncertainty on simulated debris flow variables at the two case study creeks. We also examine the utility of using reference values for specific variables to constrain the search of physically plausible parameter sets. Such values are obtained from a reference simulation conducted by Zegers (2017), who reproduced flood area and sediment volume observed during the 2015 debris flow events at Acerillas and La Mesilla creeks using FLO-2D. Zegers (2017) calibrated model parameters by contrasting results against measured flood areas, deposited volumes and flow velocity estimated from a

175   video captured with a cell phone by a local person at Acerillas. Such validation strategy has provided reliable results for several other creeks in the area. Parameter values used for the reference simulation are provided in Table 2. Modeled flood areas and maximum flow depth are shown in Fig. 1, and discrepancies with respect to observations can be attributed to the use of post-event topography.

   Based on the reference simulation, we choose reference values of $V_{mean} = 1\,m\,s^{-1}$ and $H_{mean} = 1.5\,m$ at both creeks.

180   Additionally, we estimate the reference maximum flood area using Google Earth Imagery - obtaining values of 246500 $[m^2]$ for La Mesilla, and 37000 $[m^2]$ for Acerillas -, and use deposited sediment volumes reported by Cabré et al. (2020) as reference values, which correspond to 102000 $[m^3]$ and 6000 $[m^3]$ for La Mesilla and Acerillas, respectively.

4   Results and discussion

4.1   Choice of sample size

185   First, we seek to identify the minimum sample size, N_k, for which stable DELSA results can be obtained in order to minimize computational cost (Rakovec et al., 2014). Therefore, we explore the effects of the choice of N_k on the cumulative frequency distributions (CDFs) of DELSA first order sensitivity indices. Since we include N_j = 9 parameters, the total number of simulations required for each case is $N_t = (N_j + 1)N_k$. Figure 3 illustrates the sensitivity of DELSA results to variations in sample size, N_k, for four variables simulated by FLO-2D, with respect to parameters β_1 and C_{vmax}, at the Acerillas creek. Since the

190   curves obtained for N_k = 500 and N_k = 1000 show slight differences, departing from the CDF for N_k = 100, we conclude that a sample size of N_k = 500 is adequate for further analyses. The sensitivity of DELSA results to N_k was also examined at La Mesilla creek, obtaining the same conclusion regarding sample size (not shown).

   Figure 3 also shows that, depending on the target variable and parameter analyzed, first-order sensitivity indices can be highly heterogeneous across the parameter space. In particular, the modeled response is highly sensitive to variations of β_1,
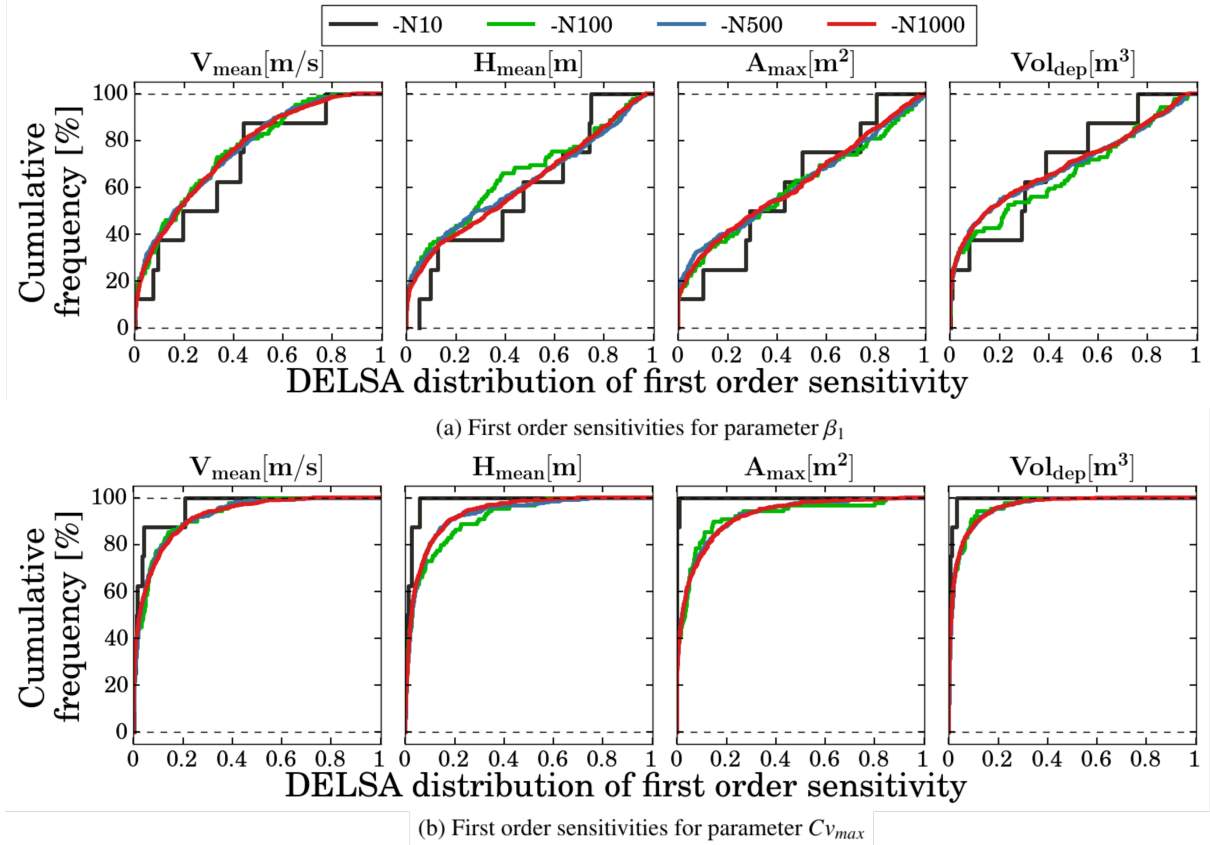
Figure 3. Effects of sample size N_k on the cumulative distribution function (CDF) of DELSA indices for parameters β_1 (top), and Cv_{max} (bottom) at the Acerillas creek.

with first-order sensitivities larger than 0.2 for approximately 60% of cases, and sensitivities greater than 0.5 for 20% -40% depending on the variable analyzed. On the other hand, the modeled variables are less sensitive to Cv_{max} in most cases, with DELSA indices smaller than 0.1 for approximately 70% of the parameter sets.

4.2 Sensitivity of model responses to model parameters

Figure 4 displays the median of the full frequency distribution (obtained with N_k = 500) of local first order sensitivity indices for the two study domains: (i) Acerillas creek (ACE), and (ii) La Mesilla creek (MES). The uncertainty bands are obtained by performing bootstrapping with replacement (resampled 1000 times). In general, β_1 provides the largest sensitivities for the simulates variables analyzed, which means that the fluid rheology, in particular the viscosity coefficient ($\eta = \eta(\beta_1)$), is a main parameter controlling flow behaviour. Moreover, Acerillas' results show to be more sensitive than those obtained at La Mesilla with respect to β_1. This could be better explained when analysed together with SD, the detention coefficient.
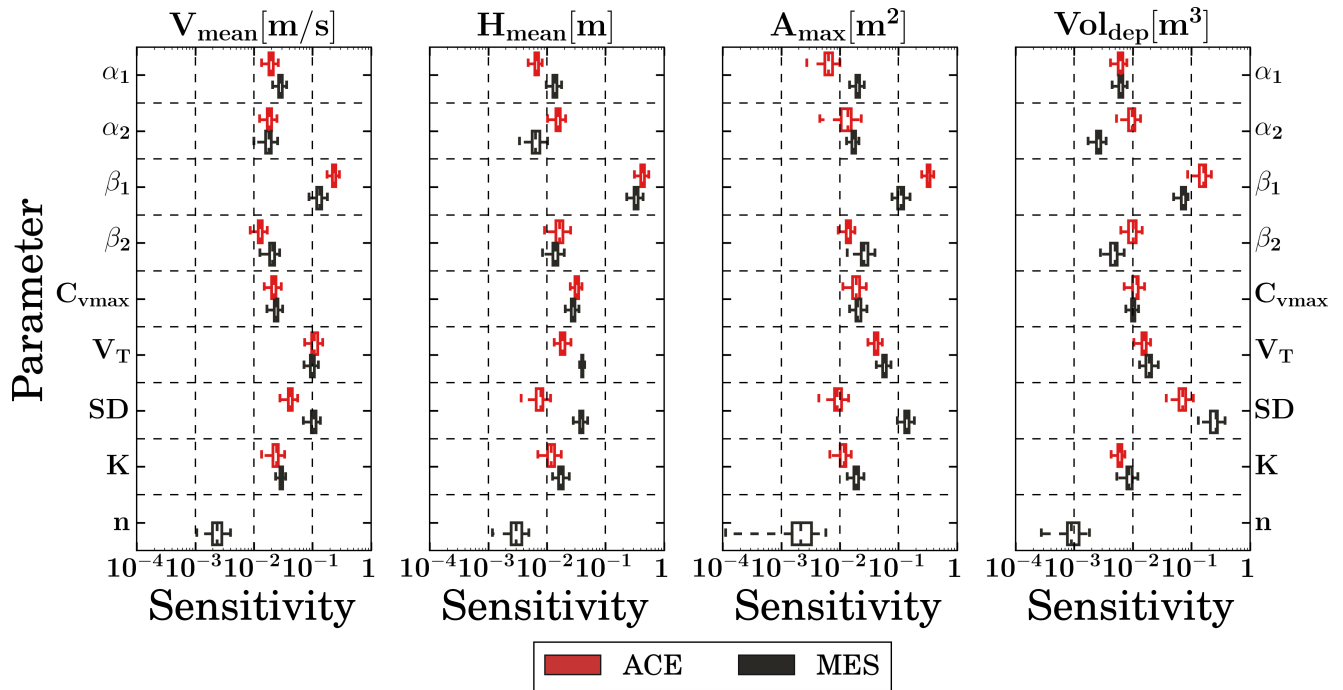
Figure 4. DELSA sensitivity indices (synthetized as the median from the cumulative frequency distribution) for all parameters and model responses. Results are displayed for Acerillas (red) and La Mesilla (black) creeks, and the sampling uncertainty (bootstrapping with 1000 times resampling) is indicated by boxplots. The vertical bold line in the boxplot is the median, the body of each boxplot shows the interquartile range (Q75 - Q25) and the whiskers represent the sample minima and sample maxima. DELSA indices are displayed in log space for a better visualization of inter-parameter differences.

205   As expected, the simulated deposited volume Vol_{dep} is very sensitive to SD because this parameter controls flow detention. For the remaining simulated variables, SD also rises as an important parameter at La Mesilla, but shows secondary importance at Acerillas, which can be explained by catchment differences. While the fluid rheology explains flow behavior at the Acerillas creek (mainly sensitive to β_1), depositional or detention processes - represented by SD - gain importance across the larger alluvial fan of La Mesilla creek.

210   Another parameter that provides large sensitivities - especially in simulated mean flow velocity V_{mean} - is the total sediment volume, Vol_T, whose sensitivities have the same order of magnitude as those produced by β_1. The high sensitivity of Vol_t on V_{mean} is explained because the former influences fluid rheology through $C_v(t)$ (see Eqs. 4, 5 and 13). However, Vol_T does not produce large variations in the total deposited volume, which could be explained because, as deposition occurs, the flow is channelized between the deposited margins, preventing flow spreading. For example, when increasing SD values, A_{max}
215 decreases as the flow is forced to stop at deeper heights. This could be a structural weakness of FLO-2D, which lacks proper representations of complex depositional and dewatering processes.

The large sensitivities in model response to variations of β_1 suggest that the viscous stress (second term in Eq. 3) is the main contributor to sensitivities in simulated frictional slope. On the other hand, DELSA sensitivity indices associated with yield stress (τ_y) and Manning's roughness coefficient - the other components of the frictional slope -, are of second-order importance. Even more, model results are practically insensitive to the Manning's roughness coefficient.

Our results show some differences with related previous work. D'Agostino and Tecca (2006) compared FLO-2D simulations performed with two sets of rheological parameters and three values of K (i.e., six simulations), concluding that the latter controls the flood area, while rheological parameters control the maximum flow depth. On the other hand, our results indicate that the laminar coefficient K provides small sensitivities in simulated flood areas, and that the most influential rheological parameter on simulated maximum flow depth is β_1. Although D'Agostino and Tecca (2006) provided the first insights into FLO-2D parameters' sensitivities, the number of parameters involved and the sample size were not large enough to draw robust conclusions. Recently, Chow et al. (2018) conducted simulations with FLO 2D using 26 different sets of rheological parameters obtained from 45 previous studies. They found that the most influential parameters - in order of importance - were Cv, SD, and β_1. These results are different from ours due to discrepancies in the parameter sampling method, the use of fixed sets of rheological parameters and their parameter ranking definition, which does not consider separate effects on key simulated variables. For example, Chow et al. (2018)) ignored the effect of the total sediment volume when analyzing Cv, whereas we examine the separate effects of maximum sediment concentration and total sediment volume, obtaining that the latter is more important than the maximum sediment concentration.

4.3   Parameter uncertainty effects

Figure 5 shows the full range of variation in model responses (produced by N_k = 500 parameter sets), normalized by reference values obtained from post-event measurements (Vol_{dep} and A_{max}) and results obtained from the reference models (for H_{mean} and V_{mean}). These are compared with the simulated ensemble that results from screening model outputs imposing five different observational constraints: (i) $\pm20\%$ reference mean flow velocity (FVEL), (ii) $\pm20\%$ reference mean flow depth (FH), (iii) $\pm20\%$ reference maximum flood area (FAREA), (iv) $\pm40\%$ reference volume deposit (FVOL) , and (v) $\pm20\%$ reference maximum flood area and $\pm40\%$ reference volume deposit (FAREAVOL). To be clear, constraint (i) results from keeping all those parameter sets that provide a simulated mean flow velocity within the range $0.8V_{ref} - 1.2V_{ref}$. Constraints (ii)-(iv) work in a similar way for other observed variables, while constraint (v) filters all parameter sets that simultaneously provide flood areas and deposit volumes within the ranges $0.8A_{ref} - 1.2A_{ref}$ and $0.6VOL_{ref} - 1.4VOL_{ref}$, respectively. We assume a weaker observational constraint in the case of the deposited volume because of possible uncertainties associated twith different measurements techniques.

Figure 5 also shows that, in general, the effects of parametric uncertainty on simulated variables are considerable, and the ensemble median can be substantially different from the reference boundaries. This is somewhat expected, since the literature provides large ranges for model parameters (see Table 1 for details). Overall, uncertainties arising from the original parameter samples (top panels) are larger in Acerillas, except for mean flow velocity. This could be explained by the larger sensitivity
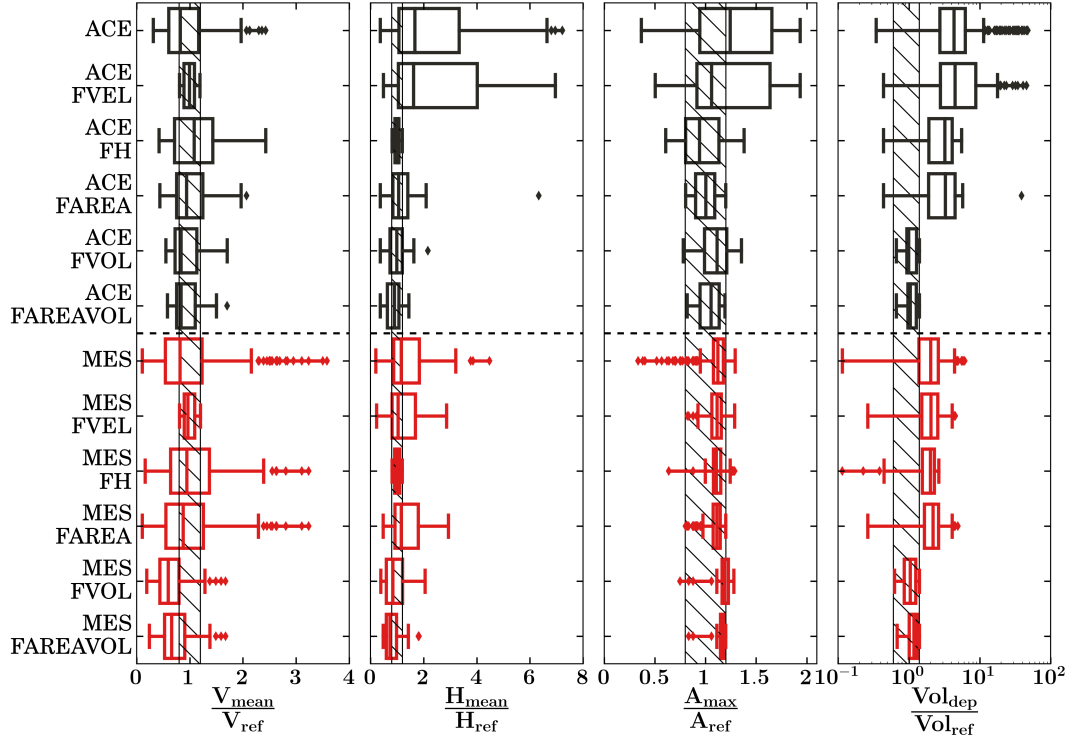
12

Figure 5. Effects of parametric uncertainty in normalized model responses for the original parameter sample (top panels) and alternative observational constraints: flow velocity (FVEL), flow depth (FH), flood area (FAREA), and sediment volume (FVOL), and joint area-volume constraint (FAREAVOL). Results are displayed for Acerillas (black) and La Mesilla (red) creeks. The hatched area for V_{mean}, H_{mean} and A_{max} corresponds to ±20% of their reference values, and for VOL_{dep} to ±40% of the estimated sediment volume. The vertical bold line in the boxplots is the median, the body of each boxplot shows the interquartile range (Q75 - Q25) and the whiskers represent the sample minima and sample maxima.

250 of flow velocity to flow rheology, while the rest of simulated variables are more sensitive to deposition processes, mainly represented by SD.

Most simulations overestimate deposited volumes and flow depth, especially at Acerillas. For flow velocity, the ensemble of parameter sets provides mixed results in both creeks, with underestimation in most cases (median values lower than the reference values); however, there are still several parameter sets that produce an overestimation of flow velocity. The results

255 obtained for maximum area reveal differences among both creeks: in Acerillas, most parameter sets tend to overestimate the flood area, whereas most simulated values are within the expected range at La Mesilla. This could happen because $Vol_{dep} \ll Vol_T$ at Acerillas, while $Vol_{dep} \sim Vol_T$ at La Mesilla; moreover, the maximum flood area at La Mesilla is approximately six times larger than in Acerillas. Thus, small variations in Vol_{dep} imply important fractional changes with respect to the volume reference values at Acerillas.

13

260   Fig. 5 shows that the velocity constraint "FVEL" does not have an impact on the rest of simulated variables. Nevertheless, the application of alternative observational constraints helps to reduce the spread of the remaining variables. For example, the height filter "FH" improves simulations of maximum flood area, although it does not have much effect on velocity or deposit volume. The area restriction, "FAREA", improves simulated flow depth only at Acerillas, as most of the original ensemble members were already inside the expected reference boundaries at La Mesilla. The volume constraint "FVOL" reduces the

265 uncertainty in all variables, with the smallest improvement for flow velocity. This is because the volume is directly linked to flow height and flood area, but not to flow velocity. Finally, the largest reductions in ensemble spread are obtained when parameter sets are constrained by using area and volume observations (FAREAVOL).

     The maximum flood area and deposited volume are relatively easy to measures, and are probably the most used post-event measurements for calibrating debris flows models (Chow et al., 2018; Cesca and D'Agostino, 2008; D'Agostino and Tecca,

270 2006; Sosio et al., 2007; Frey et al., 2016; Quan Luna et al., 2011).

4.4   Parameter identifiability
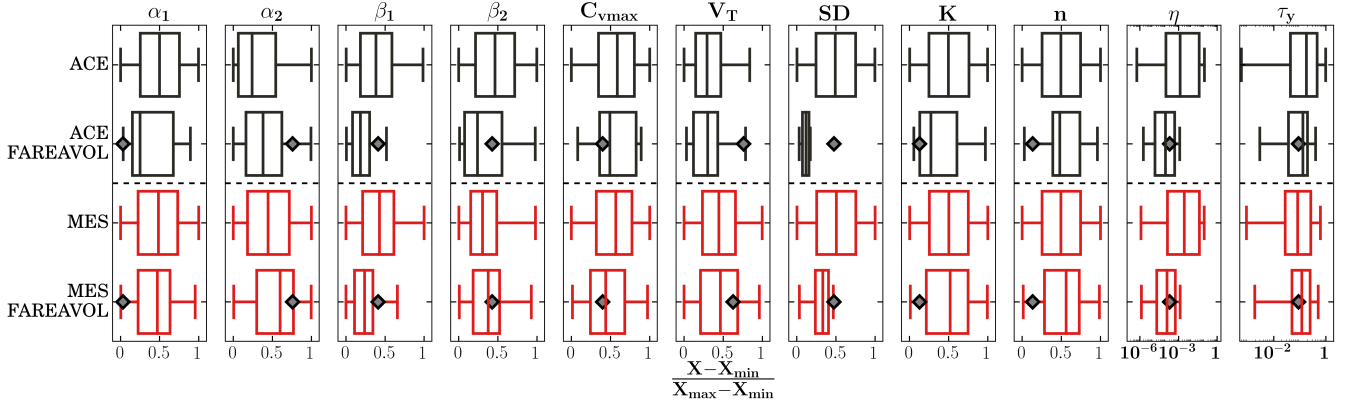
Figure 6. Effects of applying a flood area-volume observational constraint (FAREAVOL) on parameter identifiability. Results are displayed for Acerillas (black) and La Mesilla (red) creeks. The vertical bold line in the boxplots is the median, the body of each boxplot shows the interquartile range ($Q75 - Q25$) and the whiskers represent the sample minima and sample maxima. The grey-black diamonds represent parameter values for the reference simulations.

     Figure 6 illustrates the effects of applying observational constraints, specifically flood area and deposited volume constraints, on parameter identifiability. Results show that the resampled values of $\alpha_{1,2}$, β_2, C_{vmax}, Vol_T, K and n cover practically the entire original range. However, the application of observational restrictions provides substantial reductions in the ranges of

275 β_1 and SD, which mainly explain the flow rheology and depositional processes in our study areas. Further, lower parameter values are obtained in comparison to the full range, especially SD at the Acerillas creek. These results indicate that viscosity $\eta = \eta(\alpha_1, \beta_1, C_{vmax})$ is the most restricted parameter when applying these constraints, discarding all medium-high values. On the other hand, re-sampled values of $\tau_y = \tau_y(\alpha_2, \beta_2, C_{vmax})$ cover almost the entire original range.

14

The reference SD-value is close to the upper range in La Mesilla after applying constraint FAREVOL, and also much larger than the resulting maximum values filtered at Acerillas. This result is somewhat expected, since, SD does not provide large model sensitivities in that domain. Similarly, the reference β_1 value is within the upper range of filtered values ($> Q75$). However, filtered η-values around the baseline model parameter result from the compensation of low values of α_1 (near the minimum in the filtered range) and C_{vmax} (below the median of filtered values). A similar effect is observed for τ_y, whose filtered range results from the compensation of α_2, β_2 and C_{vmax}. In summary, different combinations of $\alpha_{1,2}$, $\beta_{1,2}$, and C_v can generate viscosity and yield stress values that are suitable to reproduce the 2015 debris flow events in Acerillas and La Mesilla. This is a well-known problem in environmental models - referred to as equifinality, nonuniqueness or nonidentifiability of model parameters - that has been widely discussed for more than three decades in the hydrology literature (e.g., Beven 2006; Kelleher et al., 2017), but not carefully addressed in the debris flow modeling community.

Figure 6 also shows different behavior in other parameters. For example, the reference values for K and n are in the lower range of the filtered ensembles, while the reference Vol_T is in the upper body of the boxplot. Low K-values produce low S_{f2}, the second term at the right hand of Eq. (3), representing viscous stress. This could be compensated with larger values of SD, as in the reference model. These results demonstrate that equifinality in FLO-2D does not only involve rheological parameters, and that SD could be an important parameter to correct unrealistic model representation of rheology (D'Agostino and Tecca, 2006).

The main goal of this study was to characterize the sensitivity of model responses to variations in uncertain rheological parameters, using only independent information on parameter values (i.e., the situation comparable to Sobol', as proposed by Rakovec et al. (2014)). Hence, the only verification dataset available (flood area and sediment volume from the March 2015 event) was used to examine the identifiability of model parameters. However, the relative importance of additional observations could be assessed through the Observation-Prediction (OPR) statistic (Tiedeman and Hsieh, 2004), and the potential new information provided by field data (e.g. sedimentological and morphological characteristics) for a specific parameter (e.g. alpha1, beta1) could be quantified with the Parameter-Prediction (PPR) statistic (Tonkin et al., 2007). It should be noted that, in both cases, the equation for the total local variance (Eq. 7) would be different, as additional information should be incorporated (see Appendix A in Rakovec et al. (2014).

5   Summary and conclusions

We performed a sensitivity analysis on the parameters of a widely used numerical debris flow model (FLO-2D) and assessed the effects of applying observational constraints on parameter identifiability. Our study domains are two morphologically different ravines, *Acerillas* and *La Mesilla*, located in the Atacama region (29°S, 70°W), Chile. While Acerillas is characterized by a straight and well-defined channel with almost non-alluvial fans, La Mesilla has a big alluvial fan where deposition is prone to occur.

We found that β_1 - a parameter used to estimate the fluid mixture viscosity - provides the largest sensitivities in the variables analyzed, followed by SD - a model parameter used to represent flow detention. Interestingly, the relative importance of β_1 and

SD depends on the study site, being the former more important for Acerillas and the latter for La Mesilla. These results suggest that, while rheological processes dominate flow behaviour at Acerillas (straight channel with small alluvial fan), sedimentation and detention processes control flow in La Mesilla (big alluvial fan). Although the total mobilized sediment Vol_T does not

315   have an effect on Vol_{dep}, it is important for representing flow velocity, as Vol_T is used to estimate $C_v(t)$, a key parameter for fluid rheology. Finally, model results show to be almost insensitive to Manning's roughness coefficient n, while DELSA sensitivities for the remaining parameters are of second-order importance and provide similar indices.

The comparison between the original model parameter ranges (N = 500) and the ensemble resulting from applying observational restrictions shows that SD and β_1 (i.e. η) are the parameters whose identifiability is mostly improved, while others

320   practically preserve their original range. In addition, we obtain that different combinations of model parameters (including those that describe rheology) can provide very similar results, indicating that equifinality is present in FLO-2D. Our results also support the idea that single phase rheological models lack a strong physical basis (Iverson, 2003) and, therefore, their determination requires expert knowledge. However, an encouraging finding is that the final deposited volume (VOl_{dep}) and maximum flood area (A_{max}) contain considerable information to identify model parameters.

325   We obtain that SD strongly affects model results at La Mesilla, having also large effects on simulated deposited volumes at Acerillas. Moreover, this study provides evidence that SD is one of the most important parameters controlling flow behaviour, and could possibly surrogate rheology in the model (D'Agostino and Tecca, 2006). One-phase debris flows models still lack robust representations of complex process interactions during flow stopping that produce temporal and spatial changes in fluid rheology. Thus, these rheological changes have been replaced by simpler approaches (e.g., the incorporation of SD).

330   Future investigations should aim to improve the structure of debris flow models, and hence achieve better simulations of deposition/erosion processes, stopping phases, and changing rheologies. Further, the development of computationally frugal methods to improve understanding of parameter interactions in environmental models emerges as an attractive avenue for future research.

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Interactive comment on "Sensitivity and identifiability of rheological parameters in debris flow modeling" *by* Gerardo Zegers et al.

Gerardo Zegers et al.

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We thank the Reviewer for his time in commenting on our paper. We provide responses to each individual point below. For clarity, comments are given in italics, and our responses are given in plain blue text.

The authors investigate the sensitivity of debris flow simulation results to the model parameters used by the FLO-2D software. Two debris flows in northern Chile are employed as case studies. Some of the key findings of the study are that there is some redundancy of information, that there is a certain degree of equifinality, hampering the identification of "correct" model parameter sets, and there is a broad spectrum of levels of sensitivity among the different model parameters with regard to the various

reference parameters. This paper covers a highly relevant topic which is certainly within the scope of NHESS. It is generally well-written, concise, and appropriately illustrated. Reference to the relevant sources is given. Before publication, I recommend some optimization, mainly concerning the precision of some formulations and statements and comparison of the results with other studies. In summary, I recommend minor moderate revisions.

General comment What would be interesting to see is a little bit more of discussion on how the findings of the study (e.g. the patterns shown in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) relate to previous work. Do the results confirm earlier studies, or are there some contradictions? If yes, how could they be explained?.

We will address this recommendation by adding more discussion on how our results and findings relate to previous work. Such discussion will be framed around the following ideas:

D'Agostino and Tecca (2006) compared FLO-2D simulations performed with two sets of rheological parameters and three values of the laminar coefficient K (six simulations in total), concluding that K controls the flood area and that rheological parameters control maximum flow depth. On the other hand, our results indicate that the laminar coefficient K provides the fourth-fifth largest sensitivities in simulated flood areas. Such difference probably relies on their experimental design, since their conclusions are drawn from only six model simulations.

Chow et al. (2018) conducted simulations with FLO 2D using 26 different sets of rheological parameters obtained from 45 previous studies, combined with different values of volumetric sediment concentration (Cv), specific gravity (Gs), and surface detention (SD). They found that the most influential parameters - in order of importance - were Cv, SD, and $\beta 1$ (which characterizes fluid viscosity). These results are different from ours due to discrepancies in the sampling method, their use of fixed sets of rheological parameters and their parameter ranking definition, which does not consider separate

effects on key simulated variables. Further, Chow et al. (2018) analyzed changes in Cv ignoring the effect of the total sediment volume, whereas we examine the effects of total volume and sediment concentration separately, obtaining that the total sediment volume is more important than the maximum sediment concentration. Finally, Chow et al. (2018) used fixed sets of parameters related to viscosity and shear stress, reporting thus an aggregate effect of a bigger variation of these parameters. In this study, we analyze parameter importance through local sensitivities across the entire parameter space, recognizing that the relative importance of parameters can change depending on the sub-region examined. This effect is shown in Fig. 1 through the cumulative frequency distribution of DELSA indices for Cvmax on the mean Velocity. For 60

Specific comments

Section 3.1: some of the references are formatted in a strange way

References will be formatted correctly, following the reviewer's suggestion.

L143: V is used here for volume, but before was is used for velocity - using VolT instead of VT would be more consistent. The same applies to VTest introduced in L149.

We will change the notation as suggested by the reviewer. we will use Vol_T for the total volume and Vol_{Test} for the estimated total volume of sediments.

L146: "or non-flow condition": please explain more clearly how this relates to SD.

We thank the reviewer for this observation. We agree that "or non-flow conditions" is confusing, so the text will be modified as follows: The detention coefficient SD is a model parameter that reproduces flow detention. The FLO-2D User's Manual and previous studies (D' Agostino and Tecca, 2006) suggest that SD acts as the minimum flow depth possible to occur (i.e. flow stops if flow depth $< SD$). D'Agostino and Tecca (2006) noted that this coefficient has a strong influence on the results, and it can be used as a surrogate of the rheology.

L172ff: If Zegers (2017) has successfully simulated an event through calibrating the

C3

parameters with this same event, this is NOT a validation. It would only be a validation if the calibrated parameters are then applied to another event. Please clarify.

We agree with the reviewer's point in that the word "validation" is misused. We will re-word the paragraph as follows: "Such values are obtained from a reference simulation conducted by Zegers (2017), who successfully simulated the 2015 debris flow events at Acerillas and La Mesilla creeks using FLO-2D.

Fig. 1: Nice figure, but two remarks: (i) The lines in the overview pane leading to the detailed map of La Mesilla should pass behind the legend, and not in front of it. Further, it would look better if the lower line for La Mesilla would start at the southern end of the deposit. (ii) The threshold values in the legends are ambiguous: >0-1 m; >1-2 m etc. would be correct.

We thank the reviewer's suggestions. The new Figure will look like:

Fig. 3: Please revise caption (some issues of grammar).

The figure caption will be corrected as suggested by the reviewer.

Interactive comment on Nat. Hazards Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., https://doi.org/10.5194/nhess-2020-37, 2020.
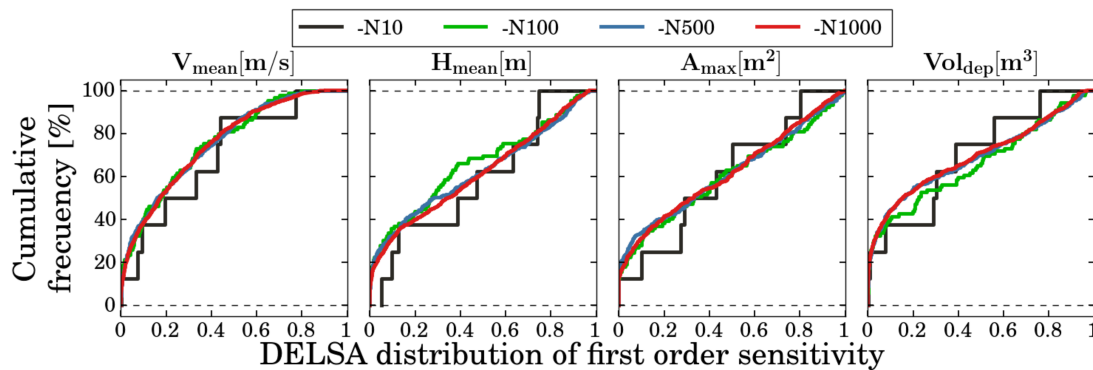
(a) First order sensitivities for parameter β_1
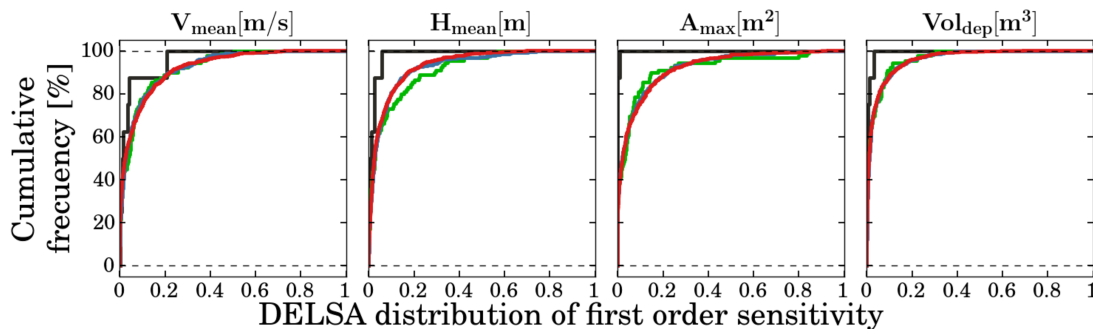
(b) First order sensitivities for parameter Cv_{max}

Fig. 1. Effect of the sample size Nk on the cumulative distribution function (CDF) of DELSA indices for parameters beta1 (top) , and Cv{max} (bottom) at the Acerillas creek.

Fig. 2. (a) Location of the two case study creeks and reference models results. The maximum observed flood areas and modeled flow depth (reference models) are shown for (b) Acerillas creek, and (c) La Mesilla

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Interactive comment on "Sensitivity and identifiability of rheological parameters in debris flow modeling" *by* Gerardo Zegers et al.

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Received and published: 20 May 2020

We thank Dr. Hill for her time in reviewing our paper. We provide responses to each individual point below. For clarity, comments are given in italics, and our responses are given in plain blue text.

Being able to match data with model results will always be an important part of people believing model results. However, those of us who understand what goes into developing a model and its application know that a good match to data is just the first step of how models can help people understand the many processes that define the world upon which our lives depend. In this work, data and physical processes are modeled and explored. The results extend as far past just model fit as current technology

early modelers can scarcely imagine. We are riding on horseback while in the future there will be progressively more insightful ways to regard models and integrate their insights into society. This is what I imagine. I am excited that I might live to see what will happen in a few coming decades.

In response to the reviewer's comment, we plan to make the following changes to the main text:

1- Section 3.2 (Methods - Sensitivity analysis) we change the second paragraph:

"In this work, we apply the DELSA method (Rakovec et al., 2014), which is a frugal local-global hybrid technique, to identify the parameters that have the largest impact on simulated debris flow variables. Although our implementation only examines first-order sensitivities across the parameter space - as in Rakovec et al. (2014) - it should be noted that DELSA has considerable unexplored potential to characterize parameter interactions, which could be achieved by including additional terms in the prediction total variance, as suggested by Sobol' and Kucherenko (2010)".

2- Section 4.4 (Results and discussion: Parameter identifiability)

The main goal of this study was to characterize the sensitivity of model responses to variations in uncertain rheological parameters, using only independent information on parameter values (i.e., the situation comparable to Sobol', as proposed by Rakovec et al., 2014). Hence, the only verification dataset available (flood area and sediment volume from the March 2015 event) was used to examine the identifiability of model parameters. However, the relative importance of additional observations could be assessed through the Observation-Prediction (OPR) statistic (Tiedeman et al., 2004), and the potential new information provided by field data (e.g. sedimentological and morphological characteristics) for a specific parameter (e.g. alpha1, beta1) could be quantified with the Parameter-Prediction (PPR) statistic (Tonkin et al., 2007). It should be noted that, in both cases, the equation for the total local variance (Equation 7) would be different as additional information should be incorporated (see Appendix A in

C3

Rakovec et al. 2014).

3- Section 5 (Summary and conclusions) we change the last paragraph:

"Future investigations should advocate for improving the structure of debris flow models to achieve better simulations of deposition/erosion processes, stopping phases, and changing rheologies. Further, the development of computationally frugal methods to improve understanding of parameter interactions in environmental models emerges as an attractive avenue for future research."

Second comment

My second comment is much shorter. In line 215 of the article we find the text "Although sediment concentration is one of the main parameters controlling debris flow rheology, model results are insensitive to Cvmax. This is explained by its small range of variation compared to the feasible range of beta-1, ..." I can see how a narrow parameter range can explain uniformity in parameter sensitivity, but fail to see how it can explain its insensitivity. Perhaps there is something not quite explained well here.

We thank the reviewer for this observation. Since the original sentence is not a proper explanation of Cvmax sensitivities, we have decided to reword the text as follows:

"The large sensitivities in model response to variations of beta-1 suggest that the viscous stress (second term in equation 3) is the main contributor to sensitivities in simulated frictional slope. On the other hand, DELSA sensitivity indices associated with yield stress (τ_y) and Manning's roughness coefficient - the other terms friction slope -, are of second-order importance. Interestingly, model results are insensitive to Manning's roughness coefficient."

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on this very fine paper. I hope my comments provoke a bit and are of some utility.

We deeply appreciate the reviewer's thoughtful comments that will help not only to improve our manuscript, but also bring new ideas on potential improvements and ap-

plications of sensitivity analysis methods.

Interactive comment on Nat. Hazards Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., https://doi.org/10.5194/nhess-2020-37, 2020.

Interactive comment