

Climate Change and Vulnerable Communities in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe:

Recommendations for a Just Recovery Plan

By Melania Chiponda

Melania Chiponda is a Feminist PhD researcher with a research interest in energy and climate justice based in Zimbabwe

Development justice and climate justice are inextricably linked, though there are other non-climatic factors adding to Zimbabwe's vulnerability which include heavy dependence on primary products and rapid population growth. These factors increase pressure on already degraded landscapes and perpetuate high levels of external debt despite debt forgiveness programmes of recent years.

Africa has the world's lowest CO₂ emissions. Climate change is now recognized as an equity issue because the world's poorest people, those who contributed least to the atmospheric build-up of greenhouse gases, are the least equipped to deal with the negative impacts of climate change. Wealthier nations that have historically contributed the most to global warming are better able to adapt to the impacts. Addressing disparities between developed and developing countries is an integral part of climate justice. Development of a country such as Zimbabwe cannot be addressed effectively without accounting for the impact of climate change on agriculture, conflicts and disease patterns, all of which contribute to impoverishment.

In facing the challenges of climate change, the priorities for Zimbabwe and other countries with similar economic conditions should be to reconsider the allocation of resources, to ensure food and water access, and to manage and adapt to long-term climate risks

As a result of climate change, Zimbabwe faced its worst drought in 40 years during the 2018/19 agricultural season. More than 5.5 million peasant farmers in the country faced near and total crop failure making more than 50% of the population in need of food aid (The New Humanitarian, 2019). However, the World Food Programme estimates that more people in urban areas are going to be in need of food aid as compared to those living in rural areas. This may come as a surprise as, usually, it is people living in rural areas who need food aid more than their urban counterparts. It is currently estimated that 2.2 million people living in urban areas are in need of food aid. The World Food Programme attributes this situation to high unemployment (only 10% are in formal



employment), lack of basic social services, perennial fuel shortages, foreign exchange shortages and daily power cuts lasting for 18 hours. The maize harvest for 2019 was only 50% of 2018, leaving a huge gap in terms of what the country needs for survival.

1.2 million of the people in need of food aid live in the areas bordering Zimbabwe and Zambia whose food security classification of IPC 4 emergency level is often associated with conflict. Consecutive years of drought have sapped people's ability to bounce back. In 2015, 30% of people living in rural areas were in need of food aid; this rose to 42% in 2016, 51% in 2018 and in 2019 the figure stood at 59%. (The New Humanitarian, 2019)

Manifestation of the Problem

The climate-induced Cyclone Idai left a trail of destruction in Zimbabwe's Manicaland and Masvingo Provinces. There were 340 confirmed deaths and hundreds reported as missing (still missing to date) and 51,000 homeless. A total of 270,000 people were affected (Chatiza, 2019). Infrastructure was destroyed, which includes bridges and 1,500km of road became unusable. The Manicaland Province is not new to climate-induced disaster, having experienced Cyclone Eline which devastated the province on 29 February 2000. Cyclone Eline induced floods resulted in a total of 136 deaths in Zimbabwe, 59,184 houses and huts destroyed, 14,999 toilets, 538 schools and 54 clinics were damaged, while 230 dams burst and 20,000 head of livestock were lost. The cyclone, which lasted until 2 March 2000 was termed the worst in 50 years and the worst in living memory (Tsiko, 2015).

Whilst the memories of Cyclone Eline were still fresh in the minds of the communities in Zimbabwe, Cyclone Japhet hit Zimbabwe and Mozambique again in March 2003. Japhet caused Save River to rise, resulting in flooding in both Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The Limpopo River also rose to above normal levels, killing 2 people and affecting 6,000 others in Lower Muzarabani in Northern Zimbabwe (Relief Web, 2003), apart from the damages recorded in the Eastern Highlands, Manicaland Province.

Cyclone Favio, which passed south of Madagascar to strike Africa as an intense tropical cyclone affected a number of countries in Africa which include Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Tanzania and Malawi. While it strengthened, Favio caused heavy rains in the Southern parts of Madagascar, making landfall in Mozambique where it brought widespread damage and loss of life. About 80% of the town Vilanculos was damaged in Mozambique. In Zimbabwe, Favio destroyed 277,000



hectares of crops and 400 electricity poles were downed (The Zimbabwean, accessed, 8 March 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe during a time when the country is still struggling to rebuild the lives of the victims of natural disasters, restore infrastructure and rehabilitate the land that was devastated by 2019's Cyclone Idai has heavily impacted its economy, social cohesion, health systems and other social services in the country. The country's development is under new threats and if not effectively and efficiently addressed, the pandemic could result in fuelling internal tensions and conflicts. To avert the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zimbabwe has adopted a strategy that is targeted at avoiding severe illness and loss of life from COVID-19 and reducing social and economic disruptions. The country put in place Lockdowns, compulsory testing of suspected cases and contact tracing as it attempts to contain the virus's spread, but this has created new forms of poverty, particularly for the people of the Eastern Highlands who are still trying to recover from Cyclone Idai. This has raised the question of how the government should ensure a just recovery for the people of the Eastern Highlands, particularly in Chimanimani and Chipinge.

Methodology

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) which was adopted for this study is a methodology that creates collaborative relationships which are important in building the power of women and raising their voices and nurturing agency. FPAR is based on the ideas of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, who argued that the road to social change is through dialogue and "conscientisation" wherein marginalised people engage in critical analysis and organise action to challenge unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices (Freire, 1970). FPAR is rooted in and respects the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). These include the understanding that PAR is a political process with a continual critical analysis of the distribution of power. It involves a continuous action and reflection spiral of planning, action, observation, reflection and re-planning; but goes one step further in acknowledging that women lack power, as compared with men of the same social group, in all institutions of family, community, school and university, religious bodies, and within the state.

FPAR's suitability in research with women living in the Eastern Highlands's rural areas, the majority of whom are peasants, is defined by the principles that are held by Feminist researchers. These include centering the women who are directly impacted by a particular phenomenon and/or injustice which in this case is climate injustice and, in turn, intersects with the COVID-19 pandemic.



It includes them as active participants in the research process as co-creators of knowledge as it is being constructed and working towards desired social change.

The FPAR was informed by rural women's struggles for climate justice and is focused on deriving meaning that the rural women give to their world in a way that builds women's power- within, power-with and power to change their world. This study's conceptualisation of power brings in the systemic view of power which emphasises how the general historical, economic, social, political, and cultural forces make it possible for some individuals to exercise power over others. This is the kind

of power that this study assumes has been and is being exerted on women living in rural areas in Zimbabwe. The study, however, brings in other conceptions of power as it is assumed that power can also be relational in the ways in which women, within the social contexts that they live in, interact with various forms of power. Again, the relations of power in society play out in the way that women live with and negotiate their way around power. This study considers power to be multidimensional and multi-faceted. In this respect, power is a resource that can be used to dominate and subjugate others, but as well it can be deployed to liberate and free oneself from various forms of oppression. When power is considered a resource, then it implies that it has the potential to be redistributed and be shared with others. This also implies that if power is considered a resource, then it can be taken away, given, and reduced as a social good.

FPAR shifts power from the traditional systems of knowledge production and places it on the women who are considered knowers and holders of knowledge. Therefore, it is not only the concerns of academic institutions that are met through FPAR but the voices and worldviews of women are centred. The research process was continuously redefined by the concerns of the rural women who were actively involved in the research process. The women came in with different perspectives and all participants sought to create political, emotional, and physical safe spaces for women so they could fully participate in the research process. Through this process, women who were traditionally marginalised were allowed to participate in a way that empowered them.

The sites of the research were Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands with research participants drawn from Chimanimani, Chipinge and Mutare Districts with a focus on the rural districts affected by Cyclone Idai in 2019. Non-probability sampling was used to recruit research participants. Kothari (2004) describes the non-probability sampling procedure as one which does not give any source for approximating the probability that each person in the population of being included in the sample. Henceforth of significance to note is that non-probability sampling is deliberate and purposive in



its execution. The researcher deliberately selects the sample for the research. Cresswell (2013) describes purposive sampling as being within the researcher's capacity to decide what to include in the sample. Therefore, participants were purposively selected on their assumed knowledge of Cyclone Idai and other climate-induced disasters that affected the Eastern Highlands.

Findings and Analysis

Disasters in Africa and the Continental Early Warning Mechanism

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 reports notes the grave implications of a temperature rise above 1.5°C, especially for Africa. The Pan-African Parliament passed a resolution recommending the need for reinforcing the Continental Early Warning Mechanism (CEWM) to prevent and address possible conflict on the Continent. The CEWM's mandate is to carry out research, data collection and analysis, and collaborate with International Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the United Nations and its Agencies, academic institutions and other necessary institutions to advise the Peace and Security Council (PSC) on the possible impending conflicts and threats to peace, stability and security in Africa, and make recommendations for the best course of action to averting them. (AfricLaw, 2020). The establishment of the CEWM is provided for in Article 12 of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol. Article 12(2) of the Protocol provides for an observation and monitoring unit, also referred to as the Situation Room which is situated in the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division of the African Union and takes the responsibility for data collection and analysis; and is also responsible for observing and monitoring the Units of the Regional

Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution are directly linked to the Situation Room (African Union, 2006).

One of the challenges with the CEWM is that it does not directly consider climate change, climate-induced pandemics, and disease outbreaks as a threat to peace and stability on the continent. The economic integration and development of Africa cannot be isolated from the pandemics like the COVID19 and climate-induced disasters, which have become more frequent over the past 10 years. Due to the uncertainties related to the cause and effect relationship of events and conflict, the task of the CEWM becomes quite challenging. There are several underlying factors such as climate change, poverty, degradation, and disease outbreaks which pose a real challenge to developing regions such as Africa, that can be cited as causes of conflict and instability in Africa. There is,



however, general agreement amongst scholars that there is no one variable that can explain the incidences of conflict.

Looking at some of the most conflict-ridden countries in Africa such as Ethiopia and how, for example, the 1983 drought there resulted in 300,000 deaths making it the deadliest that was recorded in Africa between 1970 and 2019. The largest number of deaths from climate-induced disasters in Africa are caused by droughts as opposed to floods and landslides (Varella, 2021). Some of the continent's most severe droughts took place in the 1970s and 1980s in the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia) which were characterized by floods, tropical cyclones and landslides. Thousands of people in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia were displaced as a result of the various climate-induced disasters. While these conflicts are often not associated with climate change, they are taking place in a region that has been devastated by climate-induced disasters. That these disasters may be fuelling conflicts that lead to regional instability, particularly due to internal displacements, poverty and boundary conflicts, should be a good reason for the CEWM to consider including them as potential factors.

Zimbabwe's Vulnerability to Climate-Induced Disasters

Most of the natural disasters that strike Africa are floods, which make up 60 per cent of the recorded natural disasters over the past decades (Varella, 2021). Disasters such as droughts and landslides have a huge bearing on economies. A drought that ravaged South Africa in 1990 and Cyclone *Idai*, in Mozambique and Zimbabwe in 2019, were the most destructive climate catastrophes that took place in Africa between 1970 and 2019. These two disasters resulted in economic losses of approximately two billion U.S. dollars (bid). In order to alleviate, and prepare for disasters in the country, the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) formed a Civil Protection Unit and charged it with the responsibility of coordinating and managing disasters and reducing hazards.

Zimbabwe has experienced a number of climate-induced disasters which have contributed to a large extent to its current political and economic instability. Zimbabwe is prone to a combination of climate-induced disasters and man-made hazards such as droughts, floods and veld fires (Prevention Web 2012), with HIV/AIDS (United Nations Development Programme 2010) and other disease outbreaks forming a web of interconnected disasters that have affected the country. During the period between 1980 and 2010, 35 natural disasters were recorded, which led to 6,448 deaths, giving an average of 208 deaths from disasters per year (Prevention Web, 2012). Chikoto



(2004) observes that out of the 35 recorded natural disasters, six were droughts, seven were floods, two were storms, and twenty were epidemics.

However, since 2017, the impact of climate change across sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly evident. In 2015-2016, Southern Africa experienced a “super” El Niño-induced drought, the worst in 50 years (AFP, 2016). The drought crippled rain-fed agricultural production, the major source of livelihoods for most Southern Africans. Currently, a record 45 million people across Southern Africa face serious food shortages, with approximately 25% of them currently experiencing a drought-induced food crisis (Reuters, 2019). Southern Africa is currently facing severe drought as climate change wreaks havoc in the impoverished countries. Extreme natural disasters such as Cyclone Idai had a devastating effect on Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi in March 2019. In meeting the emergency food and nutrition requirements of millions of affected people, a critical issue that had to be dealt with is building the resilience of those who are under threat from the increasingly more frequent and severe droughts. As temperatures rise to twice the global average in the sub-region of Southern Africa, the countries which have been hardest hit are Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia (Reuters, 2019).

Cyclone Idai has been described as one of the strongest cyclones to hit Africa since modern record-keeping began. There was massive destruction in Mozambique and the Eastern part of Zimbabwe. The deadly Cyclone Idai hit the area on 14 March 2019 and left more than two thousand five hundred people dead, hundreds missing and thousands homeless in the two countries. More than a million people now face starvation in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi after it destroyed most of the city of Beira and the Eastern part of Zimbabwe, leaving what has been described as a new inland ocean in Beira. These most recent disasters proved that governments in Africa lack the institutional capacity to adequately respond to climate change-induced disasters and that the resilience of the communities is weak in the wake of such disasters.

While it is acknowledged that extreme weather conditions caused by climate change affect all countries in the world, those who shoulder the burden are the poor countries and their citizens. Most poor communities live in disaster-prone areas and are hardest hit by climate change despite being the least responsible for the climate crisis. Communities in poor nations are five times more likely to be forcibly displaced by extreme weather conditions than people living in rich countries (Hernandez-Arthur, 2017). The peasant women and indigenous groups that were affected by the Cyclone Idai in Chimanmani, Chipinge and other surrounding areas depend on their natural resources which include land, forests, rivers and lakes for their lives and wellbeing.



Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands are disaster-prone areas which have, apart from the floods and cyclones that have hit the area, also experienced earthquakes. In 2009, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in the Northern parts of Mozambique was felt in Harare but the most affected areas in Zimbabwe were the Eastern Highlands which border Mozambique. It is worth noting that Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, is 270km from Mutare, which is the border City between the country and Mozambique (Chinaka 2009). In 2011, yet another 4.5 earthquake struck Mozambique and again, one of the towns in the Eastern Highlands, Chipinge, a rural area, was severely affected, and it also shares a border with Mozambique (Sapa 2011). Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands has experienced more than ten earthquakes between 1990 and 2010 with two prominent ones in 2006 which also struck as far as Harare (Sapa 2011). Though there has not been any loss of life from the earthquakes, in 2010, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Civil Protection Unit carried out an earthquake risk assessment in one of the Eastern Highlands districts of Chipinge (UNDP, 2010). The earthquake risk assessment which was conducted in the district of Chipinge pointed to the need for capacity development for both the affected communities and the authorities, and the need for mainstream disasters in development planning (UNDP, 2010)

Managing Disaster Situations

According to the International Water Association (accessed on 30 November 2021), Disaster Management involves the planning and process that is administered to protect critical infrastructure, often referred to as critical assets, from serious damage in cases where man-made or natural disasters and catastrophic events take place. The challenge with this definition lies in its failure to put emphasis on the protection of people. It is often assumed that when critical infrastructure is protected, then human life is also assumed to be protected. Experience over the years has shown that it is often not so. There are as well, some schools of thought that assume that all disasters are anthropogenic, that there is some human element to the cause of the disaster and some form of human neglect or gaps in terms of planning and administration of catastrophic events which makes the damage more severe. This brings to question of what is it that should be done and/or put in place by the authorities to ensure that both humans and infrastructure are protected in the case of the occurrences of calamities. The management of disasters is complicated in the sense that they often take many shapes and their magnitude and intensity differ. However, the distinction between disasters which are a direct result of human error such as industrial explosions and failures in structures are considered man-made and those which result from physical phenomena such as typhoons, floods and droughts are considered natural disasters. A growing



number of scientists attribute some of the so-called natural disasters to climate change, caused by global warming which results from increased greenhouse gas emissions. In short, disaster management involves preparing for, and responding to, disasters through strategically organizing the available resources to reduce the harm that they cause. Whatever form they take, disasters disrupt the lives of communities and have severe impacts on poor and vulnerable groups in society that involves the destruction of lives, property, economies and the environment. Most groups in society, particularly those living on the margins of society find it difficult to cope.

The World Confederation of Physical Therapy (2010) distinguishes between four types of disasters which are classified as natural. These include floods, earthquakes, volcanoes and hurricanes which have an immediate bearing on people's health and well-being, as well as secondary implications which result in the suffering induced by such catastrophic events. Pandemics are highly contagious disease outbreaks which disrupt the social, economic and even political systems of countries. The environmental emergencies consist of technological and industrial accidents which involve hazardous material, though these also include massive forest fires caused by human activity. Finally, there are the complex emergencies which result from the breakdown of authority with incidents of looting and vandalism of strategic installations. Wars and conflict also fall into this category. Disaster Management is critical in that it involves making analyses and managing those factors that cause disasters and also involves assessing the extent to which members of a community can bounce back after disaster situations. It is this analysis of a community's exposure to loss that is at the core of a Disaster Management Strategy. For example, analysing how coastal communities are affected by rising sea levels and how they are disproportionately exposed to floods in cases of cyclones.

Countries in Africa need to have sound Disaster Management plans in place due to the continent's vulnerability to climate-induced disasters. Globally, Africa is considered the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change despite its very low greenhouse gas emissions. According to the African Development Bank (2020), under all climate scenarios that are above 1.5 degrees Celsius, Africa remains the most vulnerable continent. This means that the continent faces increased collateral damage which poses more risks to its economies and frustrates its development gains because food systems, water, access to energy, and infrastructure are under threat. Some of the factors which make Africa more vulnerable, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, is that 95% of its agriculture is rain-fed, and a large portion of the population depends on weather-sensitive livelihood activities such as fishing which leads to income losses and compromises access to food. Seven out of the ten most vulnerable countries to climate change are in Africa (African Development Bank, 2020). The most



vulnerable country is Mozambique with Malawi ranked in third position (Ibid). The Sovereign Limits states that the boundary between Zimbabwe and Mozambique is 1,423km, covering the North to South direction. This is a colonial boundary that was established by Portugal and Britain. Zimbabwe and Mozambique do not dispute this boundary which cuts across several tribes and indigenous territories of people with kinship ties and sharing the same totems and other cultural identities. The border between Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands and Mozambique is very fluid with some villagers in some parts of Chimanimani herding their cattle in Mozambique, and some children from Mozambique attending school in Chimanimani.

Zimbabwe's Civil Protection Unit

In response to the catastrophic events that took place in the country, the Government of Zimbabwe established the Civil Protection Act (Chapter 10:06) of 1989 with the intention of finding the best ways of preparing for and responding to, disaster situations. This Act is described as:

“An Act to establish a civil protection organization and provide for the operation of civil protection services in times of disaster; to provide for the establishment of a fund to finance civil protection, and to provide for matters connected with or incidental to the foregoing.” (Civil Protection Act, 1989:2).

The Act is more focused on protection but there is little mention of how the country should prepare for disaster situations, particularly given geographic factors such as the Eastern Highlands which are disaster-prone. The history of the districts of the Eastern side of the country bordering Mozambique has been characterized by floods, cyclones, earthquakes and storms, without mentioning the pandemics which often affect the whole country. Zimbabwe's ability to handle environmental disaster cases has often been criticised due to lack of preparedness with experts describing it as “slow and extremely inadequate” (Gogo, 2014). Preparing for disasters is a step toward reducing the severity of the hazards. Disaster preparedness involves a number of actions which include raising the community's awareness of disasters and putting in place coordination mechanisms, preparedness planning and the training of groups that are going to be actively involved in the disaster management process. In some instances, preparedness may involve some community drills to minimize the chances of panic and unorganized and disruptive movement in the disaster-affected zones which may disrupt the proper management of disaster situations.

The Act fails to include recovery which is essential in any disaster situation so that communities are able to bounce back after calamities. Ignoring this important aspect seems to imply that any



recovery process in the post-disaster phase becomes incidental. The Act does, however, mention recovery of the expenses that were incurred by the State during a disaster situation. With this top-down approach, the focus is, as is to be expected, on those who hold power and authority. In this case, the National Civil Protection Committee falls under the Executive which has the power to declare a catastrophic event or disaster. This committee which is appointed by the Minister and consists of the Police Commissioner, Commanders of some Army branches, the Secretary of Health, Director of Prisons, Director of Civil Aviation, the Secretary-General of the Red Cross, Representatives from the Fire Brigade and other individuals whom the Minister considers resource persons who have knowledge and expertise in disaster management.

The composition of the National Civil Protection Committee reflects the complex power relations in the Zimbabwe state. An immediate question that can be raised here is: where should the people living in disaster-prone areas be represented in this body? Science has predicted that the frequency and intensity of climate-induced disasters are going to increase due to global warming. The Act goes further to speak to the position and roles of “Chairman” thirteen times. This use of male-centred, gender-blind language tends to normalise the exclusion and non-participation of women in decision making and political processes. The use of gender-blind language in an Act that seeks to protect people in disaster situations creates one of the barriers that women face in their efforts to participate in political processes but this is often not perceived as violence. Violence against women is often represented by images of a battered woman, but when such exclusionary terms such as “Chairman” are used, they represent the system’s structural violence where women’s participation is subsumed under the term “man”. In the place of this power-blindness, this study attempts to “de-centre” the Civil Protection organs in the country to acknowledge and appreciate the personal histories and knowledge of the women living in the Eastern Highlands. It focuses on Chimanimani which is a rural area and in the power-relations in Zimbabwe rural areas are ascribed a particular space within the system of power. Even though FPAR was explained to the research participants, there were expectations that the researcher, just like in mainstream research processes, should have power over both the process and outcome. There were expectations that the researcher should take the lead. The researcher had to revisit and discuss, a number of times, how every community member taking part in the FPAR is a co-researcher and that decision making power and the power to construct meaning has to be shared within the group, which included the researcher.

Gender blindness is considered the lack of awareness and appreciation of how women and men are impacted differently by the same phenomenon or situation as a result of the differences in



roles, statuses, needs, and priorities in society (Dharmapuri, 2017). Gender blindness in legislation and policies has the potential to negatively affect the goals of such important processes and initiatives such as those covered in the Civil Protection Act because the failure to consider the differences between men and women often results in an incomplete and inadequate understanding of the organisation, the geographical spaces of operation and the needs of the groups that are supposed to benefit. This results in the ineffective and inequitable provision of protection under the Act.

When the Civil Protection Act states that it is intended to put in place a civil protection organization that is intended to offer protection during disasters, the question which may be critical to ask is, whose reality, worldview and knowledge are informing the protection process when the piece of legislation is blind to the gender relations and identities that exist in the rural areas. Women form the majority of Zimbabwe's population and being blind to this fact raises concerns about "masculine" knowledge and management, where disaster management processes are seen as bearing the face of a man and the women being the victims. When disaster management programmes do not take into consideration issues of male power, the participation of women in the disaster management initiatives often fails to guarantee the empowerment, upgrading and welfare of women during and after disaster situations. The failure of policy and law-making, which in Zimbabwe are male-dominated institutions, (Hamandishe, 2018) to consider the plight of women in disaster management may be an indication of men's fear of losing authority, leading to the continuous failure to recognise the important role that women play in improving family and community welfare before, during and after disasters. This can also be seen as a failure to value women's independence and self-determination, particularly in the dominant patriarchal traditions that continue to exist in Zimbabwe's rural areas which are prone to climate-induced disasters. The participation of women in disaster management is important as their inclusion will likely drive not only just recovery after disaster situations but will likely promote gender equality, women's independence, welfare as well as health.

The majority of the research participants in this study were women who had lived through at least five climate-induced disasters. In the Eastern Highlands, the community that is severely affected by climate-induced disasters are those living in Chimanimani's Rusitu Valley. The community of Rusitu, particularly women, who constitute more than 70% of the small-scale farmers, has been pushed into extreme poverty due to the Cyclones and tropical storms that are now striking the country more severely and more frequently over the past few years. For example, in March 2019, Chimanimani, particularly Rusitu Valley, was hit by Cyclone Idai, which left, according to the



women research participants, more than 400 people dead, more than 600 missing, and more than 10,000 homeless. This was followed, the same year, by Cyclone Kenneth, which destroyed some of the infrastructures that had survived Cyclone Idai. Cyclone Chalane of 2020 and Cyclone Eloise of 2021 struck Chimanimani in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, reducing most women to destitution in a place where they survive almost entirely on agriculture. The Eastern Highlands, particularly Chimanimani is one of the country's major suppliers of bananas, pineapples and other fruits as the soil yields some of the best fruit in the country. The women of Chimanimani produce bananas which form part of the community's staple diet, pineapples, yams, mangoes and other local fruits, as well as maize and other grains.

“It had never happened in my life that I would need food aid. I have always known myself to be the one who gives out food, but now the gods and our ancestors seem to be withholding their fruits from us. The land and the forests have been desecrated by people, particularly the commercial farmers and mines coming into our area and fail to respect our sacred shrines and cultures.”

Women Imagine another Way

After the destructive 2019 Cyclone Idai, the women who survived the cyclone in Rusitu Valley started imagining an alternative way of managing disasters that would ensure people are rescued from danger and brought together to respond to the disaster in ways that are informed by their needs.

The current way of coordinating disaster management is too detached from the people who are affected by the disaster. The community of Chimanimani indicated that they get information late, sometimes two or three days before the disaster, and there is very little time for them to prepare to relocate. If the community does manage to relocate, there is usually much panic, and the transport system becomes congested. Women in the Rusitu Valley stated that disasters are coming in various forms, and they feel that it would be good for the government to consider the best response for each disaster so that they could assist instead of being told what decisions have been taken. For example, being told to stay indoors which is what the Civil Protection Unit did during Cyclone Idai which killed the most people at the same time in the history of natural disasters in the Eastern Highlands. Women accused the government of presenting information in a language that they do not understand and in a format that is not consistent with how they communicate and pass on information in their community, making the information inaccessible to most women. They, however, stated that some of the men in the community are able to use electronic gadgets



to get information but they also sometimes fail to understand what the information means and yet that is what is essential for their survival during disaster situations.

“They should understand that some of these terms and words that they use are alien to us, so they need to break down the words and explain them to us in time. Women are often left in the dark because, as women, we are not involved in decision-making processes, and therefore, those women who are single, aged or widowed, without male kin to represent them, are often left in the dark. That needs to change.”

As indicated by the women, the government disaster response is managed by a multi-sectoral team. The issues of health, food, education, rescue efforts and other social services are quickly restored, and as much as possible fewer lives are lost. However, the way information is disseminated does not consider language. English continues to be the official language used to communicate even though the Constitution of Zimbabwe recognizes 14 official languages. There is no indication when information should be disseminated to the people, and those affected are reduced to just acting as

per the given instructions during the disaster period. Many women have accused the government of being too rigid and not looking into and addressing women's specific needs. The government's risk management plan is insensitive to the fact that women are affected by disasters differently from men because of care work and the burden of household responsibility.

Women would like a disaster management plan guided by the following principles, which they have used during Cyclone Chalane, with fewer losses.

- Be flexible and be able to respond to the needs of the affected people, particularly women, and respond to the context in which it is going to be used.
- Information should be disseminated early. As soon as the government is aware of a looming disaster, they should translate the data and package it so that women and other vulnerable groups can also be able to understand it. The government must make sure that the information reaches everyone. Information must not be a privilege for a few connected people because people's lives depend on it.
- Sanitary ware must not be considered a privilege which is still a must for all women affected by disasters. Lack of sanitary ware erodes women's human dignity and, therefore, should be guaranteed.
- As soon as it is known that a disaster will strike, the needs of people with medical conditions such as high blood pressure, asthma, HIV, diabetes, and others should be



prioritised. Their medication should not be an afterthought but should be provided upon demand because some people survive the disasters but die from a lack of medication for their respective conditions.

- Responses to disasters should not encourage individualism but should focus on building collective benefits with a spirit of cooperation. As much as possible, resources should be shared and used to benefit the collective and not individuals.
- Communities living in disaster-prone areas should be involved in disaster risk management policy and planning. The planning should focus on women as they form the majority of the rural population. They are caregivers, caring for the families, land, livestock, and the land.
- It is critical to focus on access to food and other basic needs after disasters. Moreover, it is imperative to do that in empowering ways that involve the survivors of disasters as some of the food may go bad while children may end up not attending school because there is no money for fees, yet much is allocated for food. We should also focus on rebuilding and reconstruction.
- Trauma support should not be done by government or NGOs funded by fly-by-night professionals (Psychologists), particularly those who want to medicate social problems. We received a lot of medication, the purpose of which we are not sure of since we do not have specific conditions. We do have conditions that require therapy that is informed by us, our culture and our collective beliefs. Part of the healing that we need involves:
 - Understanding, from the government's perspective, what caused the disaster?
 - What can we do/not do so that we do not repeat the same disaster(s)?
 - If these cannot be avoided, what should be done to protect lives, animals, and nature?
 - What do these disasters mean for the next generation, our children and their children?

Women understand their communities and know how to navigate their way through disasters, but the government has excluded them. Local knowledge systems are rooted in customs and traditions that can complement the work of technocrats, engineers and doctors.

Government Propositions to the Disaster Risk Management

In 2003, there were suggestions and some initial ideas in Government to put in place a Department of Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Management that would replace the Department of Civil Protection under a proposed Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Management Act. This was intended to make it more effective by making it an independent



institution under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development (Madamombe 2004). Whether placing it under the supervisory jurisdiction of a Minister, who forms part of the Executive, would make this critical body independent is debatable, but what should have been obvious is that it will not be operating under the Office of the President directly. It should be noted that in Zimbabwe, the Minister is appointed by the President and is part of the Executive arm of government, thus rendering this body's independence a sham. If this would have become a reality, the new Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Management Act should have led to the setting up of a national training centre for research, rescue and fire. However, 2007 saw the Government of Zimbabwe coming up with a Disaster Risk Management Policy Draft which was not shared with other stakeholders for consultation and has had the same status to this date (Siamachira 2011). No dialogue has been entered into since then.

If this proposed Act would have become a reality, it was going to facilitate the establishment of an emergency planning and disaster management committee. Whether these would address the male-centred and community participation issues in the emergency planning and disaster management processes remains debatable. Since women form the majority of the vulnerable groups in such processes, their exclusion and the marginalization of rural communities is a structural issue that is entrenched in societal beliefs and attitudes and normalized in ways that make it difficult to be addressed. Such systemic injustices are often not addressed through changing the names of institutions and changing their mandate. Changing the language and naming the injustice is a political process that may lead to addressing the injustices that are entrenched in institutions. Even though this new proposed new law was going to include all mainstakeholders it would not guarantee the participation of marginalised groups which include women and those living in disaster-prone areas. The stakeholders proposed for the Disaster Management Committee, according to The Herald of 3 March 2003, including research institutions, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. The recommended institutions hold considerable power in society and therefore may reproduce the same inequalities and exclusions that should be addressed in order to have people-centred disaster planning and preparedness initiatives. The proposed function of these committees was to guarantee coordinated efforts of all the stakeholders during disaster events. The committees were mandated to advance the country's preparedness and capacity to handle disasters and threats to humankind.



Dealing with a Twin Disaster

Zimbabwe's Civil Protection Act includes disease outbreaks and plagues that threaten the lives and well-being of people as well as natural disasters. The people of the Eastern Highlands were actually facing a "twin" disaster, that is, the recurrent cyclones and the COVID-19 pandemic. Cyclone Chalane took place at a time when the rate of COVID-19 infections in the country was very high. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe allocated more resources to the COVID-19 pandemic which meant much less for the people of the Eastern Highlands who were left homeless by Cyclone Idai in 2019 and desperately needed assistance.

While it is critical to address the COVID-19 pandemic urgently, Zimbabwe is being devastated by climate change. The frequency and severity of climate-induced disasters have increased, creating a need for the climate crisis to be treated as an emergency. The analysis of climate change, health pandemics and conflict as separate problems poses a challenge in addressing all three. The country's vulnerability to climate change-induced displacements and the possibility of conflicts arising from the same should be acknowledged and addressed.

Zimbabwe's efforts to rebuild after COVID-19 should also consider the climate crisis, and address both at the same time. The recovery from COVID-19 cannot be tackled without dealing with climate change.

One main reason why the climate crisis should not be ignored in Zimbabwe's COVID-19 recovery plans is that the disasters in the country are increasing in frequency and intensity. This implies that the COVID-19 pandemic is taking place within the climate crisis, therefore, worsening the state of affairs in the country, particularly in disaster-prone areas such as the Eastern Highlands, frustrating the country's development goals. The climate-induced disasters in Zimbabwe have resulted in the loss of life, impoverishment, destruction of infrastructure, injury, and climate change-induced diseases such as malaria exacerbated by the increased warmth and humidity in the areas. The social and economic disruption goes beyond the coping capacity of Zimbabwe's population. Any policy proposition in the country which seeks to address the COVID-19 pandemic and other disease outbreaks should not ignore the climatic conditions and the context in which the pandemics are taking place. Climatological disasters such as droughts, heatwaves, and floods, as well as cyclones, cannot be divorced from biological disasters such as epidemics, plagues and outbreaks of new diseases. The country's experience of disasters is not isolated from other existing conditions.



The Plight of Women

Both the pandemic and climate change impact women differently and also more severely. These crises have increased the already existing gender disparities in access to resources that would otherwise enable women to bounce back. For the women of Chimanimani and Chipinge, the government's responses to the COVID19 pandemic were a *o n e - s i z e - f i t s - a l l* which did not take into consideration their plight and the informal nature of their livelihoods. Zimbabwe does not have social safety nets, instead, women end up carrying the load that the government is unable/unwilling to carry. This can be explained mainly by the gender roles that are prescribed to women. Women's household burden increased drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic as they carry the additional responsibility of child-care, child education and other household duties that have to be undertaken when families are forced to stay at home in order to contain the spread of the virus. Women carry out many functions that the government ought to do such as the provision of social services. The majority of women in Zimbabwe work in the informal and less formal sectors but the government.

imposed COVID-19 regulations revealed the blind spot that is characteristic of many regulations with respect to gender roles. The definitions that are given of what constitutes essential services excluded women as food producers, caregivers and informal workers. This further impoverished women as their informal workplaces were destroyed in order to allow society to „physically distance“ from each other. Most women's stalls were destroyed and labelled "COVID-19 super-spreaders" as the people's markets where women trade are often quite crowded because their products and services attract buyers in search of low prices.

The government closed down the women's markets without any rescue packages that would have enabled them to maintain their small businesses. The structural forms of violence perpetrated during natural disasters and pandemics appear to target women as a social class and stem from the uneven distribution of power in society. This has proved to be harmful to women which became quite pronounced during the combined effects of the pandemic and the climate crisis.

Towards a Just Recovery

A COVID-19 recovery plan should take into consideration the context in which the pandemic took place, that is, the pandemic came in in the midst of a climate crisis. In a society with unequal power relations, the process and mechanisms devised should aim to free women from carrying the unjust burdens imposed by both the climate crisis and the pandemic. A fair and Just Recovery plan



should be comprehensive and offer a shift from rationalizing patriarchy. A Just Recovery should centre the needs of women and other vulnerable members of society, ensuring that their needs are met in ways that close the gender gap.

The Community's Demands for a Just Recovery

The following are some of what should be included in a Just Recovery plan that governments should adopt to ensure that the recovery plans do not exacerbate existing poverty levels.

- *Rescue packages* - should be made readily available and accessible to women for the revival of their livelihoods. Access to these funds should be user friendly and presented in a format and language that women and other vulnerable groups are able to understand.
- *Recognition of the informal sector/women's economies* – the recovery plans should acknowledge and recognise the informal sector and the contribution it makes to the survival of the poorest sections of society. If the need arises for the informal sector operations to be registered, then processes should be less bureaucratic, inexpensive and not restrictive for the women living on the margins of society.
- *Value of women's labour* – women's contributions to society through their unpaid carework and household work should be recognised and given value. Women's unpaid work within, for example, the health services, provision of water and fuel for cooking and heating, educating children and looking after the elderly members of society should be valued accordingly, recognised and fairly remunerated as the country puts in place its recovery plans.
- *Redistribution of carework* – women should be freed from part of the carework and other reproductive work, and that work should be redistributed to other members of society in ways that are just and equitable. This should allow women to also participate in productive work. This implies that a just recovery should also focus on changing the attitude and harmful cultural and religious practices that discriminate and exploit women.
- *Gender-just climate responses* – governments should recognise and appreciate that women are disproportionately affected by climate change and should place women's needs and aspirations at the centre. Disaster responses should restore women's livelihoods and lives in ways that are informed by principles of justice and protection of women's human rights.



- *Dismantle Patriarchy* – Recovery plans should move away from being male-centric by not assuming that women and men have the same needs and that these needs can be addressed by the same framework. Society has internalised patriarchy as is reflected in the laws, policies, culture, belief system and other areas of life, such that in order for change to be realised, there should be deliberate efforts to centre women's needs.

Conclusion

Both the Climate-induced disasters and COVID-19 are not only health, social and economic issues, but also human rights, particularly women's rights, crisis. The effort that has been made to address the COVID-19 pandemic through financial commitments has actually shown us that governments are capable of urgent, fast, decisive and multi-sectoral action in emergency responses that protect the economic, social and cultural rights of society. Therefore, when the government does not respond to the plight of disaster-stricken communities in the country, it is because they lack the commitment and political will and not necessarily resources. This is an opportunity for the Zimbabwean government to demonstrate leadership as the country moves from emergency to recovery, to create a "new normal" that also addresses the climate crisis. There is a need for the country to legislate a Disaster Just Recovery Plan which is centred on people and climate change.



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