
Climate change disasters

Zimbabwe's vulnerable communities need a just recovery plan

By Melania Chiponda

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This is a summary of a research project undertaken for the Institute for African Alternatives by DR MELANIA CHIPONDA. The intention was to explore a just recovery plan based on the voices of those most affected by these disasters, particularly the women. The full research report is available on the [IFAA website](#). The research found the dire economic circumstances of Zimbabwe are compounded by repeated climate-induced disasters together with the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is the women who are disproportionately affected.

The exposed Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe have still not recovered from Cyclone Idai which swept through the region in 2019 and Cyclone Chalane in 2020, which led to drastic loss of

life, destruction of infrastructure and disease. However, Zimbabwe does not have the capacity to cope with the massive social and economic disruptions caused by these disasters.

The research project examined Zimbabwe's response to climate disasters in the midst of the country's economic paralysis. It surveyed existing environmental vulnerabilities in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, many of which can be attributed to human causes. The research focused on the following questions:

- What has the state's response been to the climate-induced disasters?
- What are the institutional and organisational requirements for the state to effectively deal with climate disasters?
- What are the material, human and financial resources needed to cope with natural disasters such as Cyclones Idai and Chalane?

Participatory action research was used to define community-driven solutions to the problems reported by local communities. Particular attention was paid to women in the context of the pandemic to demonstrate their vulnerabilities and the increasing burden of household

and care responsibilities. This women-centred research was able to build on alternative knowledge systems and community care, support and solidarity infrastructure. The research reflected on how the response to disasters during the pandemic revived and reinforced existing inequalities in terms of gender and class.

Poor communities in Zimbabwe are dependent on agriculture, which is in turn dependent on favourable weather conditions. The variability of the weather is a perpetual and universal problem for farmers and in the current era of global warming, extreme weather events have worsened and become more frequent. Zimbabwe faced its worst drought in 40 years during the 2018/19 agricultural season and more than half of the population required food aid (*The New Humanitarian*, 2019).

In the Eastern Highlands, along the border with Mozambique, Cyclone Idai left a trail of destruction in Zimbabwe's Manicaland and Masvingo provinces in 2019. There were 340 deaths and hundreds were reported missing, while 51,000 people were left homeless. A total of 270,000 people were affected (Chatiza, 2019) and bridges and 1,500km of roads became unusable.

The Manicaland province is not new to climate-induced disaster. Cyclone



Photo credit: GroundUp

Eline devastated the province in 2000. Floods resulted in 136 deaths, 59,184 houses and huts destroyed, 230 dams burst their banks and 20,000 heads of livestock were lost. The cyclone, which lasted over a week, was said to be the worst in living memory (Tsiko, 2015). More storms hit the province during the 2000s, bringing widespread damage and loss of life.

Cyclone Japhet hit Zimbabwe and Mozambique in 2003 (ReliefWeb, 2003) and in 2007 Cyclone Favio struck Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Tanzania, Malawi and Madagascar. In Zimbabwe alone, Favio destroyed 277,000 hectares of crops and downed 400 electricity poles (*The Zimbabwean*, 2007).

The world outbreak of Covid-19 arrived in Zimbabwe when the country was still struggling to rebuild the lives

of the victims of these natural disasters, restore infrastructure and rehabilitate land devastated both by drought and storms. With the onslaught of the pandemic the country's development came under new threats, and if not effectively and efficiently addressed the pandemic could fuel internal tensions and conflict.

To mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Zimbabwe adopted a strategy aimed at avoiding severe illness and loss of life and reducing social and economic disruption. The country was placed under lockdown, and compulsory testing of suspected cases and contact tracing were introduced to try to contain the spread of the virus.

However, this has in turn 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 questions about how the government should ensure a just recovery for the people of the Eastern Highlands, particularly in Chimanimani and Chipinge.

The research study used Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), a methodology based on the ideas of the Brazilian philosopher and educationist, Paulo Freire (1970). Research is a political process comprising continuous planning, action, observation, reflection and re-planning. FPAR goes one step further in acknowledging that women lack power, compared with men of the same social group, in the family, community, school and university, religious bodies and within the state.

The research process was defined ►►

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by the concerns of the rural women who were actively involved. They contributed different perspectives and sought to create political, emotional and physical safe spaces for women so they could fully participate in the research process. This allowed women who were traditionally marginalised to participate in a way that empowered them.

Research participants were drawn from the rural districts of Chimanimani, Chipinge and Mutare, areas affected by Cyclone Idai in 2019. Participants were selected for their experience of Cyclone Idai and other climate-induced disasters that affected the Eastern Highlands.

Findings and analysis

Between the country's independence in 1980 and 2010, there were 35 natural disasters; six droughts, seven floods, two storms and 20 epidemics (Chikoto, 2004). Together they resulted in 6,448 deaths, which amounts to an average of 208 disaster-induced deaths per year (PreventionWeb, 2012).

Since 2010, Southern Africa has experienced the worst drought in 50 years (AFP, 2016). This was a “super” El Niño-induced drought, according to climatologists. El Niño's effects are felt across the world as droughts and floods, which are becoming more frequent and more severe. Scientists believe



Photo credit: Denis Onyodi

that with 1.5°C in global warming, the frequency of El Niño events are likely to occur twice as often (McSweeney, 2017). This means experiencing El Niño every 10 years rather than 20 years. African countries have been advised to prepare for more extreme weather conditions, yet the models of development adopted over the past 50 years have left the continent's ecosystems in a fragile state, unable to cope with the adverse impacts of climate change.

The most recent disasters have 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 greatest burden are the citizens of poor countries (Hernandez-Arthur, 2017). Most poor communities live in disaster-prone areas and are hardest hit by climate change, despite being least responsible for the climate crisis.

Managing disasters

Disaster management involves preparing for, and responding to, disasters through strategically

organising the available resources to minimise the harm that they cause. Most people, particularly those living on the margins of society, find it difficult to cope with such events.

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 continent most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, despite its very low greenhouse gas emissions.

Zimbabwe's civil protection unit

In 1989 the government of Zimbabwe passed the Civil Protection Act to prepare for, and respond to, disaster situations. The Act is focused on protection (after a disaster has struck) and there is little mention of how the country should prepare for disasters, even in disaster prone areas such as the Eastern Highlands. Zimbabwe's ability to handle environmental disasters has often been criticised for its lack of preparedness. Experts describe government responses as “slow and extremely inadequate” (Gogo, 2014).

Preparing for disasters is a step towards reducing the severity of the crisis. This includes raising the community's awareness of potential



disasters and putting in place coordination mechanisms, preparedness planning and training of those who are going to be actively involved in the disaster management process. This could involve community drills to minimise potential panic and prevent unorganised and disruptive activities in the disaster-affected zones.

The Act also fails to provide for recovery after the immediate disaster, which means that any recovery process post-disaster is incidental.

The Act only mentions recovery of the expenses incurred by the state during a disaster. This top-down approach focuses on those who hold power and authority, in this case the National Civil Protection Committee, which falls under the executive and has the power to declare a catastrophic event or disaster. This committee is appointed by the minister and consists of the police commissioner, commanders of some army branches, the secretary of health, the director of prisons, the director of civil aviation, the secretary general of the Red Cross, representatives from the fire brigade and other individuals whom the minister believes have knowledge and expertise in disaster management.

The composition of the National Civil Protection Committee reflects the complex power relations in the Zimbabwean state and immediately the question arises: where are the people living in disaster prone areas represented in this body?

The Act refers to the position and roles of the 'Chairman' 13 times. This use of male-centred rather than gender-neutral language tends to normalise the exclusion and non-participation of women in the decision making and political processes. The use of male-centred language in an Act that seeks to protect people in disaster situations reflects the barrier that women face in their efforts to participate in political processes. When such exclusionary terms such as 'Chairman' are used,

they represent the system's structural violence in which women's participation is subsumed under the term 'man'.

The research project responded to this power-blindness by foregrounding the personal histories and knowledge of the women living in the Eastern Highlands. It focused on Chimanimani which, as a rural area, is ascribed a particular space within the system of power.

Gender blindness is regarded as the lack of awareness and appreciation of how women and men are impacted differently by the same phenomenon or situation as a result of their differences in roles, statuses, needs and priorities in society (Dharmapuri, 2017). Gender blindness in legislation and policies may negatively affect the goals of 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 ineffective and inequitable provision of protection under the Act.

Policy and lawmaking in Zimbabwe are male-dominated (Hamandishe, 2018). The participation of women in disaster management is important as it is likely to drive not only a just recovery after disaster situations but also gender equality, women's independence, welfare as well as health.

The majority of the research participants in this study were women, dependent on agriculture, who had lived through at least five climate-induced disasters. The Eastern Highlands, particularly Chimanimani with its rich soil, is one of the country's major fruit suppliers. The women of Chimanimani produce bananas, which form part of the community's staple diet, along with pineapples, yams, mangoes and other local fruits, as well as maize and other grains. One participant stated:

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, who fail to respect our sacred shrines and cultures.

Women imagine another way

After the destructive 2019 Cyclone Idai, the women 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.

Coordinating disaster management is currently 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, when there is very little time for them to relocate. If the community does manage to move, there is usually much panic and the transport system becomes congested. Women in the Rusitu Valley stated that different disasters take different forms and they feel the government should consider the best response for each. The women want to assist instead of being told what decisions have been taken. Women accused the government of presenting information in ways that were incomprehensible to most women.

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.

The women found the government disaster response was managed by a “multi-sectoral team”. The issues of health, food, education, rescue efforts and other social services are quickly restored, and fewer lives are lost. However, information dissemination does not take language into account and English continues to be used to communicate.

The government’s risk management plans are insensitive to the fact that women are affected by disasters differently from men because they carry the burden of care work and household responsibility.

Women supported the disaster management plan used during Cyclone Chalane, which resulted in fewer losses. It was guided by the following principles:

- Be flexible and able to respond to the needs of those directly affected by the disaster, particularly women; respond to the context in which aid is going to be used.
- Information should be disseminated early. As soon as the government becomes aware of a looming disaster, they should translate data and present it to women and other vulnerable groups in a way that they are able to understand. The government should 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 should not be considered a privilege – it is a necessity 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. Some people survive the disasters but then die from lack of medication needed for their respective conditions.
- Responses to disasters should focus on building a spirit of cooperation. Resources should be shared 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, 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. In addition to allocating food there should also be a focus on rebuilding and reconstruction.
- Trauma support should not be conducted by the government or NGOs that are funded by unreliable professionals, particularly those who prefer to use medication to treat social problems.
- A participant said: “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.

Dealing with a twin disaster

Zimbabwe’s Civil Protection Act also covers disease outbreaks and plagues that threaten the lives and wellbeing of people as well as natural disasters. The people of the Eastern Highlands have had to face a “twin” disaster: recurrent cyclones and the Covid-19 pandemic. Cyclone Chalane occurred when there was a high rate of Covid-19 infections. The government of Zimbabwe diverted resources to dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, significantly reducing aid for the people of the Eastern Highlands who had been left homeless by Cyclone Idai of 2019 and desperately needed assistance. While it is critical to address the Covid-19 pandemic urgently, Zimbabwe is being devastated by climate-induced disasters that are more

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frequent and more severe.

The climate crisis needs to be treated as an emergency. Climate change, pandemics and conflict pose a significant challenge to Zimbabwe’s development. The country’s vulnerability to climate change-induced displacements and possible conflict 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.

The plight of women

The current health and climate disasters impact women differently and also more severely than men. These crises have increased the already existing gender disparities in the distribution of resources, which affect the women’s ability to bounce back. For the women of Chimanimani and Chipinge, the government’s “one-size fits all” approach to the Covid-19 pandemic did not take their circumstances into account. Zimbabwe does not have social safety nets, so it is the women who end up carrying the



Photo credit: Humanitarian Coalition

load that the government is unable or unwilling to carry.

This is mainly due to the gender roles that are prescribed to women. Women’s household burdens increased drastically during the Covid-19 pandemic as they had to carry the responsibility of child care and education as well as the other household duties that intensified when families were forced to stay at home to contain the spread of the virus. Women often have to 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 that revealed the blind spots in many regulations with respect to gender roles. The official definitions of essential services excluded women as food producers, caregivers and informal workers. To enforce physical distancing, stalls at the markets where mostly women trade were destroyed. The markets were labelled super-spreaders as they are often quite crowded. The government closed down the women’s markets without providing 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. They stem from the uneven distribution of power in society, which became quite pronounced due to the combined effects of the pandemic and the climate crisis.

Towards a just recovery

A Covid-19 recovery plan should take into consideration the fact that the pandemic occurred in the midst of a climate crisis. In a society with unequal power relations, mitigation 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 shift society away from patriarchy. A just recovery should be based on the needs of women and other vulnerable members of society, ensuring that their needs are met in ways that close the gender gap.

The communities’ demands

Just recovery plans should include the following to ensure that existing poverty levels are not exacerbated:

- *Rescue packages – to revive* ➤

women's livelihoods. These should be made readily available and accessible to women. The process to access these funds should be user friendly and explained 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 informal sector operations need to be registered, the administrative processes should be unbureaucratic, inexpensive and not exclude women living on the margins of society.
- *Value of women's labour* – women's contributions to society through their unpaid care work and household work should be recognised and given value. For example, women's unpaid work within the health services, their provision of water and fuel for cooking and heating, and the tasks of educating children and looking after the elderly should be valued accordingly, recognised and fairly remunerated as the country puts its recovery plans in place.
- *Redistribution of care work* – women should be freed from some of the care work 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 attitudes and harmful cultural and religious

practices that discriminate against 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 the 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 to the extent that for change to be realised there should be deliberate efforts to centre women's needs.

Conclusion

Climate-induced disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic concern not only health, social and economic issues. They also raise human rights issues, particularly women's rights. In other countries, the efforts to address the Covid-19 pandemic through financial commitments has shown us that governments can be capable of urgent, fast, decisive and multi-sectoral action in emergency responses that protect the economic, social and cultural rights of society. This is an opportunity for the Zimbabwean government to demonstrate leadership, and 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 pass legislation for a just disaster recovery

plan that is centred on people and responds to the greater frequency and intensity of climate-induced disasters due to climate change.

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