Devolving Disaster Risk Management in Zimbabwe: Review of the Human Rights Based Approach

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Abstract

The article interrogates and unpacks contemporary disaster risk management configurations framed within the devolution approach in Zimbabwe. While it is not a new phenomenon the world over, devolving disaster risk management in Zimbabwe is in its infancy, hence, the scholarly review. Evidence and experiences gleaned through the literature review show that where effective disaster risk management is transferred to the local communities in terms of decision-making, disaster preparedness, and resilience are strengthened. The study deploys narrative inquiry within the qualitative research design which is best attuned for data generation in post-disaster environments and theoretically is guided by the pragmatic human-rights-based approach. The narratives were extracted from 15 research participants as well as key informants and established that the Zimbabwean system of disaster risk management has several facets that represent the failure and short-comings in being a completely devolved disaster risk management system, hence, the loss of human life, property and livelihoods. The experiences of cyclone Idai in Chimanimani District represents a systemic failure to protect and promote the rights of ordinary citizens in disaster-prone communities. The study argues that when disaster risk reduction activities are within the powers and authority of the local people, stronger communities are built and disaster preparedness is

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heightened, hence, the magnitude of disasters upon humanity is lowered which is the promotion of human rights at the grassroots level. The study recommends that responsibilities to manage disasters be transferred from a central authority to grass root institutions to experience realistic devolved disaster risk management.

Keywords: *devolution, risk, human rights, resilience, grass roots, top-down approach*

INTRODUCTION

Disasters the world over, are often managed from a top-down approach which has weaknesses of disregarding and excluding the local people from participation (Chatiza, 2019). In the context of the Chimanimani District study, grassroots refers to the activities occurring at ward and village levels. The contemporary experience of disaster management in Zimbabwe and other developing regions of the world is that disaster risk governance relegates the full involvement of those at the grassroots to the periphery. Ironically, these are directly affected by disasters due to none or limited devolution (Dube *et al.,* 2018). This top-down approach to disaster management implies that the processes not only leave out the local population from participating in things that affect them at present and in the future but infringe on their human rights.

The thrust of the research study is that the devolution of power and authority as well as responsibilities for preparing and mitigating disasters at the grassroots level ensures that local people get involved in promoting their rights and interests as humans. Evidence from earlier studies by Kapucu (2008) and Chanza *et al.* (2020) has it that the centralised top-down approach to disaster management in the history of disasters in Zimbabwe disregarded and contributed to pushing local people into the margins as they only made subjects of humanitarianism. Therefore, the article articulates and interrogates contemporary disaster management formulas in the Chimanimani district with the view of bringing out nuances about devolved disaster management in Zimbabwe. The first part of the paper focuses on the general background of the study in which a justification of the study is expressed as it seeks to answer the main research question. It also delves into conceptual, theoretical and

methodological frameworks that guide the study while the second part interrogates trends and trajectories of disaster risk governance in Chimanimani from a human rights based approach.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUALISATION

The literature review focuses on the three issues that are key to knowledge development. Firstly, it delves into conceptualisation which allows a common understanding of terms. Secondly, the nexus that exists between disasters and human rights is discussed followed by the third part which reviews the Zimbabwe disaster management structure and brings to the fore the limitations and interrogates the need for a devolved disaster risk reduction approach. This article adopts Da Costa's (2014) conceptualisation of human rights as largely understood as rights arising from human nature and inherent dignity. Thus, the adoption of the human rights approach practically is the normative working methodology based on internationally recognised human rights. Further, the study bases its understanding of a disaster on the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society (2018: 72) as '…a sudden calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community's or society's ability to cope using its own resources'. At the same time, the study adopts (Nhede, 2013; Mukonza and Chakanyuka, 2012) definitions of devolution as a process in which central government transfers responsibilities to sub-units at the grassroots level or a form of decentralisation through which authority is given to selected units for policy management. Therefore, in this case, devolved disaster risk governance means that there ought to be a transference of responsibilities, authority and power to plan, design and implement procedures at lower tiers of society which in this case are the ward and village Chimanimani district.

THE DISASTER HUMAN RIGHTS CONNECTION

Studies concur that disasters can have a negative effect on human rights (Dube *et al.,* 2018). This usually occurs through increased poverty which leads to the denial of the affected basic rights like access to food, shelter, healthcare and education for the affected (Dube, 2017). All significant

rights are enshrined in the Constitutions of many countries including Zimbabwe where the study is located. One can also conclude that disasters can slow down the pace of development, similarly denying the fulfilment of basic rights mentioned above, a view also shared by Bongo *et al.* (2013) who postulate that the top-down approach deployed in the Zimbabwean disaster management largely fails to develop community resilience and promote human dignity. The right to development itself is well espoused in international conventions, that is, the Charter of the United Nations (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) (Bongo *et al.,* 2013). The right to development which disasters derail was further affirmed by consensus during the World Conference on Human Rights held in 1993. Basing arguments on these international standards, Have (2018) argues that disasters are a major cause of human rights violations.

When disasters occur, four categories of human rights are at stake (Have, 2018). The first one is the protection of the right to life. The immediate concern when a disaster strikes is the preservation of life. The second set of rights relates to access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, health and education. The right to life and rights relating to necessities is a primary concern during the emergency phase (Brookings-Bern Project 2008). In the recovery and reconstruction stage, the priority shifts to rights concerned with long-term economic and social needs or well-being encompassing livelihoods, housing, land and property. In this phase of recovery, the last set of rights is civil and political relating to movement, documentation, freedom of expression and association (Have, 2018).

ZIMBABWE DISASTER MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES: THE STATE OF DEVOLUTION ON THE GROUND.

The attainment of independence in 1980, saw the government of Zimbabwe enacting legislation that birthed a complex national disaster management system. As specified in the Civil Protection Act of 1989, when a disaster occurs, there is an immediate activation of all available

national resources inclusive of the setting up of the National Civil Protection Fund (Bongo *et al.,* 2013). This can be followed by a declaration of a national state of disaster by the president. The Civil Protection Act of 1989 and other policy directives were the bedrock of the establishment of the Department of Civil Protection (DCP) housed under the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works. This body is tasked with implementing disaster preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery based on the amended Civil Protection Act of 2001 (Chikoto and Sadiq, 2012).

The DCP has multifarious functions that include resource mobilisation to prepare for management and response to a disaster, national-wide provision of disaster management-related information and the training of civil protection officers at national, provincial and district levels. It is a requirement that various government hierarchical levels including the private sector 'plan for disasters by producing operational plans for emergency preparedness and response – plans that would be activated in the event of a disaster' (Bongo *et al.,* 2013:3). According to Interworks (1998) and Chirenda *et al.* (2018) to assist the provincial and district levels to plan for disasters, the DCP appoints officers at these levels. In reality, the Provincial Civil Protection Committee (PCPC) is chaired by the Provincial Development Coordinator (PDC) while the District Civil Protection Committee (DCPC) is chaired by the District Development Coordinator (DDC) (Dube, 2017).

Though chaired by the Director, the National Civil Protection Committee as required by law is composed of actors involved in disaster management such as the defence forces, the police, the air force, the fire brigade and officials from the Ministry of Health (Chirenda *et al.,* 2018). The committee members are tasked with advising and assisting the director in planning, establishing and maintaining measures/systems for civil protection (Dube, 2017). These actors as key stakeholders in disaster management often provide resources and expertise in dealing with disasters. Criticising the civil protection structure, Dube (2017) argues the national committee leaves out social agencies like NGOs which are so critical in disaster risk reduction in Zimbabwe.

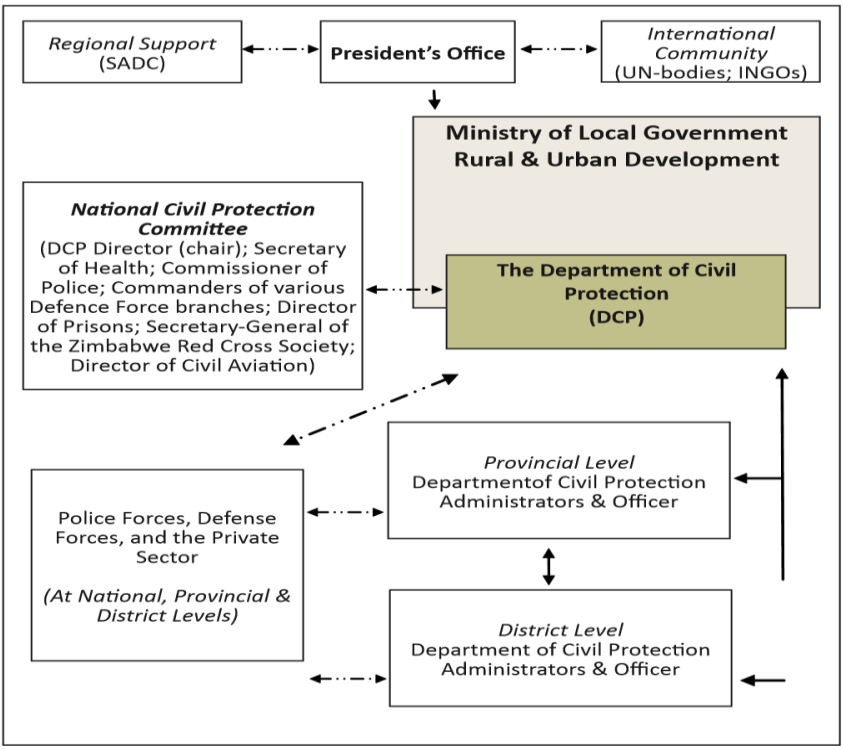

Figure 1: *Disaster management structure in Zimbabwe* (Chikoto and Sadiq, 2012)

The Zimbabwe disaster management structure significantly shows lack of devolution (Mavhura and Mapuva, 2021) as responsibilities, power and resources remain centralised, despite guarantees contained in the 2013 Zimbabwe constitution. Consequently, as found by Bongo *et al.* (2013) disaster mitigation and response mechanisms tend to exclude several categories of people in communities such as the poor, women, the elderly, minorities, the disabled and children. While devolution discourse in Zimbabwe anchors on giving power and responsibilities to provinces and districts, this devolution may not directly empower local communities. While the councils are the lowest tier of government in Zimbabwe (Mavhura and Mapuva, 2021) devolution of disaster risk reduction (DRR) should also be anchored on village and community-based

structures consequently giving power and responsibilities to local communities. During the Cyclone Idai disaster, local authorities were not leading response activities as the national government took the lead (Chatiza, 2019).

As argued earlier by Alexander (2010:12) and Sinthumule and Mudau (2019: 33), disasters are 'local affairs' and local communities are theatres of disaster responses. In Chatiza's (2019) view, devolution to the lowest tier enhances the resilience of communities vulnerable to disasters. Hermansson (2019) found that decisions address the needs of the community when they are made at the local level. Earlier Bang (2013) and Bongo *et al.* (2013) found out that local communities are not included in risk reduction initiatives. Mavhura (2016) reiterates that local communities' participation in DRR programmes is limited in the current disaster legislation and structure in Zimbabwe. In this article, we view the lack of strong devolved local institutions in Zimbabwe as a contributor to vulnerability to disasters, a view also expressed by Bang (2013) in Cameroon. This is despite the call made by the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (2004) for decentralised and institutionalised risk mitigation at local and community levels. A devolved disaster risk management structure empowers the local communities to control resources and make decisions in disaster risk reduction. This speaks to the participation of local communities in matters that affect their lives, an imperative in the Zimbabwe Constitution. We view devolved DRR management as engendering resilient communities since it empowers communities to respond first when a disaster occurs.

The need for devolved community responsibilities and participation in disaster risk management cannot be overemphasised given that the national government faces challenges in respect of adequate human, material and financial resources (Bang, 2013). Empowering local communities ensures the effective implementation of DRR measures (Paulido, 2008). Amaratunga *et al.* (2018) cite an example of decentralisation of responsibilities and power by the Philippines government to Albay local government resulting in effective disaster management plans. The author further cites how devolution in Indonesia

enabled Banda Aceh local authority to engage local residents in the reconstruction of the city in the aftermath of the Tsunami of 2004.

While we view the need for devolved DRR that gives power and responsibilities to communities through village and local communities' structures, the anticipated and existent problem is the issue of finances. Literature review shows that local institutions in the context of DRR lack financial resources to plan, respond and recover from disasters (CLGF, 2011). This is despite the appeal of the Sendai Framework to invest resources in all sectors for DRR (Mavhura and Mapuva, 2021). To reduce the impact of disasters, United Nations (UN 2015) submits that both private and public DRR investments are important. While the issue of human capital (labour), may not be a challenge, capacity building in some aspects of the disaster management cycle is vital (Chatiza, 2019). Even with the un-devolved structures in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, the government and council's human resources tasked with disaster management lack adequate skills for disaster risk management (CLGF, 2011).

THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted a human rights approach to disaster management. A devolved disaster management system offers prospects for a human rights approach to disaster management. Applied to development, a human rights approach to development fosters the empowerment of disadvantaged and economically excluded groups in society (Ghai, 2001). UNDP (1998) posits that a human rights-based approach to development seeks to secure freedom for a life of dignity and expand the choices and opportunities of the people. A human rights-based approach to disaster management is premised on equality. Thus, the assistance that is provided is based on need. Without sounding utopian, there are better prospects for effective disaster response when communities are empowered to make decisions regarding who requires assistance. The practicality of this view remains peripheral as long as state bureaucrats believe communities cannot mobilise themselves even with external support to respond to risks. Besides equality, a human rights-based approach to disaster management requires accountability and empowerment. A human rights-based approach empowers communities to claim their rights. Have (2018; 172)

gives an example that 'providing shelter is not charity, compassion or favour: it is a universal right. When a disaster takes place and relief is provided, governments can be held accountable'. As communities are given power and responsibilities in the context of devolution of disaster management, they are empowered to hold the government responsible for disaster management. Humanitarian action in pre, during and post disasters, should be geared towards the attainment of human rights including but not limited to the right to life and the right to food and shelter (UNDP, 1998). As argued by the UNDP (1998) a human rights approach to disasters promotes the rights of groups in need of special consideration such as women, the elderly, children, people with disabilities and people living with HIV (PLHIV).

The premise of the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) is that human rights are the rights of human beings arising from their very human nature and dignity (Da Costa, 2014). The human rights based approach is a normative working methodology based on internationally recognised human rights, in this case, for the furtherance and observance of the rights of local people in disaster-prone districts of Chimanimani. Based on Borberg and Sano (2017), the HRBA played a peripheral role in development debates and practices, particularly disaster management. Thus traditionally, it is only in the post-World War 2, the Cold War and post-colonial era that the approach started to filter into disaster issues. In 1986, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights to Development which was reaffirmed by the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (Borberg and Sano 2017). Consequently, in 2003, the UN bodies agreed that UN development policies must be guided by the principles of human rights which include a) universality, b) individuality, c) interdependence, d) accountability, e) participation and f) non-discrimination. Thus, to Borberg and Sano (2017), HRBA development and disaster management thinking does not see disaster management as charity work or almsgiving but as part of efforts to fulfil the rights of people.

In essence, when for example central government and donor agencies migrate from the traditional disaster management style to an HRBA, conceptually local people transform from being passive recipients of alms

to active rights holders (Sano 2007). Therefore, in this fashion, rights holders must have access to their political representation and be able to challenge certain positions or and approach courts and police for accountability purposes. Therefore, the purpose of the HRBA is to empower communities and individuals by giving them political, social and economic power so that they can determine their present circumstances and the future with the idea of eradicating poverty. Why then is the HRBA attuned to this 'Devolution and Human Rights' study? Because it is suitable for ensuring that the rights of vulnerable indigenous groups in disaster-prone districts of Chimanimani are given priority, particularly with the view of empowering those communities at the grassroots level. Secondly, the HRBA strengthens the concept of citizenry, accountability and ownership which are key for developing community resilience to disasters.

METHODOLOGICAL GEOGRAPHIES

Methodologically, the study deployed narrative inquiry and documentary analysis as key data collection and data generation strategies within the qualitative research approach. These allowed the examination of indigenous peoples' lived experiences of preparing and mitigating disasters at village and ward levels. Research participants shared their experiences through storied realities that brought out local people's worldviews about disaster management in Chimanimani. The documentary analysis helped the research process by exposing the contents of documents found at the district disaster management committees which brought out the level of participation of the local population in issues that affected them. Thus, a purposive sampling technique was utilised in the identification and selection of research participants. Consequently, 20 participants were engaged in the Chimanimani district inclusive of key informants and survivors of the previous disasters. Each interview did not take more than an hour while the participants were in their natural environments.

Our study adopted a qualitative approach involving the collection and analysis of non-numerical data (Jackson *et al.,* 2007) to unravel how devolved disaster risk management promotes the human rights of the indigenous people in the Chimanimani district. We opted for a qualitative approach since the approach allows for the capturing of respondents'

opinions, views, and versions of reality and lived experiences on how disasters are infringing their rights, worsened by paternalistic top-down approaches to disaster management and how a devolved disaster risk approach ensures the participation of the indigenous people in disaster management. Using a qualitative approach, we explored how a devolved disaster risk management benefits from the capabilities, skills and knowledge of indigenous people.

The study adopted a case study to analyse devolved disaster risk management in Chimanimani District. A case study as argued by Baxter and Jack (2008) involves the exploration of a phenomenon within some particular context through various data sources, and it undertakes the exploration through a variety of lenses to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon. As argued above, a case study promoted the in-depth investigation of disaster and human rights as well as prospects of devolved disaster risk management in the context of Chimanimani Districts in Zimbabwe. In doing so, we had the leeway of using multiple data collection methods in the form of unstructured in-depth interviews, documentary analysis and FGDs since a case study permits their use (Yin, 2003). A case study design is useful where inadequate knowledge exists or where there are theoretical inadequacies. Devolution is a new practice in Zimbabwe, knowledge generation is still required especially on how a devolved disaster risk management setup promotes the rights of the indigenous people.

The population of our study was the indigenous inhabitants of the Chimanimani District since literature reveals they are prone to disasters particularly weather-related disasters (Dube *et al.,* 2016; Marago and Chitongo, 2021). The study focused on the local people of the district who are the Ndau, a sub-group of the Shona. The study deployed the purposive sampling technique and focused on twenty indigenous people of the communities that experienced the adverse effects of the disaster from each of the districts as well as five key informants from the district. The employment of purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of participants with rich empirical data originating from their lived experiences that inform the study, a view also held by numerous studies (Etikan and Bala, 2017; Ames *et al.,* 2019).

Data in the study was collected using unstructured interviews and FGDs that allowed for an in-depth interrogation of issues through directing probes and follow-up questions (Ryan et al., 2009). In line with Adhabhi and Anozie (2017) and Guest *et al*., (2017), the study continued to experience and explore new nuances through further probing which remained a common feature in the research sites. On average, the interview process lasted for 50 minutes and besides in-depth interviews, the study utilised the focus group discussion which is a group interview that had between 6 to 12 people in line with Mishra (2016) and Guest *et al*. (2017) recommendations. The robust interaction in the FDG generated thick descriptions of prospects of devolved disaster risk reduction leading to effective disaster management. The FGD was made up of 8 participants who were indigenes of the district. Ethically, the study obtained both verbal and written consent for the research before eliciting data from the respondents. In this regard, no one was forced to participate in the study or manipulated to do so. To guarantee the anonymity of the respondents, the study used pseudonyms as a way of protecting their right to privacy and anonymity and upholding the principle of confidentiality.

CHIMANIMANI DISTRICT RESEARCH SITE

Chimanimani District shown in Figure 2 below is located on the eastern side of Zimbabwe in Manicaland province. It shares the border with Chipinge District and on the further eastern side is the Republic of Mozambique. According to Chanza *et al.* (2020), Chimanimani District is located in ecological region one which is characterised by high rainfall and where settlements, that is, Kopa, Nyahonde and Chipita are in valleys, hence, were affected by Cyclone Idai. The district has an estimated population of 134 940 (ZIMSTAT 2012) and is inhabited by the Ndau people, a sub-grouping of the Shona main ethnic group. Typified by rugged terrain, the district receives an average of 1000 mm in the east and slightly below 200mm in the west. The high rainfall patterns in the eastern side of the district make it prone to flooding and other disasters that come with high rainfall. Cyclone Idai ranks as the worst-ever disaster to strike the Chimanimani District (Chatiza, 2019). Agriculture, forestry and tourism are the major economic activities of the district (Marago and Chitongo, 2021).

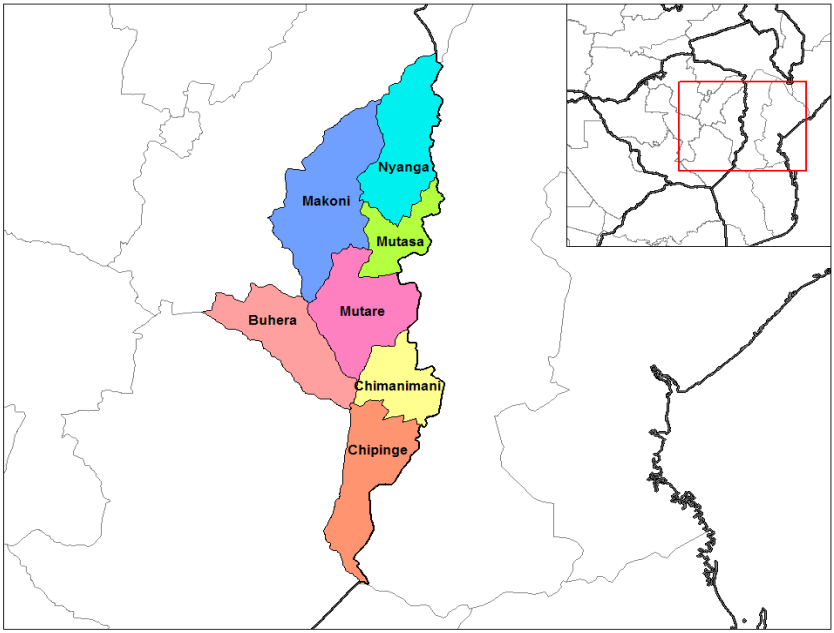

Figure 2: *Location of Chimanimani District* (Google maps)

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part of the article delves into empirical findings from the Chimanimani District and discussions anchored on four main sub-themes. The discussions are about the existing state of devolution of disaster risk in Chimanimani, budgetary and financial management, indigenous knowledge systems in disaster management and the gender dynamics of disaster risk management.

EXISTING DISASTER MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN CHIMANIMANI DISTRICT

Interrogating the levels of devolution within the framework of disaster management in the Chimanimani disaster-prone district of Zimbabwe required that the study first establish the current and existing management system to be able to link it with aspects of human rights. In that regard, the study found out that existent disaster management systems are located within the government Department of Civil Protection and follow an

inherited system from the colonial administration however with some reformations. The legal framing is anchored in the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 supported by the Civil Defence Act of 1982 which was repealed and replaced by the Civil Protection Act of 1989 and is supported by the National Policy for Civil Protection (Dube, 2017). The legislation and policy framework was designed to empower the Civil Protection Department and the National Civil Protection Committee to manage disasters in the country. Technically, the Civil Protection Department does not formulate policies as this responsibility is done by the Parliament, hence, the Parliament is responsible for enacting the laws while the President of the Republic is vested with the powers to declare states of disaster. As such, the Ministry through the Civil Protection Department coordinates all activities on disasters in Zimbabwe. On bureaucratic and administrative structures, the Civil Protection Department is organised at three levels, which are, the national, provincial and district. Therefore, civil protection matters at the lowest level are handled and discussed at the district level, hence, a void exists at village and ward levels. At all these levels, the main actors who constitute civil protection are representatives seconded by line ministries, departments, the military, the police, NGOs and private corporates. In Chimanimani District, field-based evidence showed that the district civil protection committee was only represented by government officials as the District Administrators lamented about the non-availability of other actors.

> We normally work with representatives from non-state actors, that is the NGOs and the private companies but their availability is not always guaranteed. We know they bring in important input to the District Committee, but when they are not available, there is nothing we can do about it.

Asked about the representation of the indigenous people in the committee, the answer was that their concerns were brought to the committee through government officials who interact with them in their wards and villages. In Chimanimani, the District Civil Protection was constituted of government representatives, NGOs, private firms, the chief and a Councillor. In the Chimanimani District case, the assumption was that the local people were represented by the Ward Councillor and the Chief. However, the jurisdiction of the Chief and the Councillor did not cover every area of the district. Consequently, the study observed that

local people's participation in determining the direction of civil protection matters was peripherally located in the rural enclave. The source of the peripherisation of allowing the local population to participate in things that affected them was a misconception of devolution, hence, the study grapples with the question of whether the Zimbabwean rural governance systems were experiencing real devolution or not.

The state of devolution which Rondinelli and Nellis (1986) refer to as de-concentration and delegation of responsibilities through the transfer of planning and management from central government is what this study found to be missing in Chimanimani District. When authority and some level of power are transferred from the Headquarters in Harare to Manicaland Province and Chimanimani District, it only resembled some form of decentralisation, not devolution. Devolution according to Rondinelli and Nellis (*ibid.)*. involves the delegation of responsibilities to the grassroots level, a system and experience the study found missing in these rural communities. Power and authority to plan and manage disasters remain at the national level while the District Civil Protection Committees in this district were merely implementing that which was provided by the central authority in Harare. The contradiction about devolution or/and decentralisation originates from Chapter 14 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe of which article 264 (1) states that:

> Whenever appropriate, governmental powers and responsibilities must be devolved to provincial and metropolitan councils and local authorities which are competent to carry out those responsibilities…

The major question is therefore about how much may the participation of the locals at the grassroots be enhanced when the law states that such governmental responsibilities may be devolved to provincial councils? To what extent does this system give powers of local governance to the people and enhance their participation? The research experiences in Chimanimani found a void in terms of devolution, hence, the argument that the life of local people of Chimanimani District contradicted Sano's (2007) explanation of devolution. In a real devolved disaster risk management system, the locals cease to be passive recipients but become active participants in decision making. Based on the above presentation, the level of local people's participation and involvement in the making of

major decisions on disaster preparedness and mitigation was a far cry. This sentiment was supported by one of the Ward Councillors who said:

> As a representative of the people here in my Ward, I can say that disaster management remains centralised, major issues and decisions remain located in Harare the capital and here at the local level, we only rubber stamp and pretend to be active participants when in reality we are recipients. We are passive 'participants' for things come from the national committee already in black and white.

Outside the specialised District Disaster Management Committee, rural communities have a governance system located in the Rural Councils and as provided by the Rural District Councils Act of 1988. That administrative structure provides for the election of Ward Councillors, hence, our study established in the district, each Ward had a functional ward representation in the person of a Councillor some of whom sat in the district civil protection committee. In this setup, the assumption was that the voices of the local persons were represented by the elected councillors. In theory, this was devolution at its best but in practice, major decisions about disaster management remain located in the Headquarters in Harare in which the district and provincial systems were channels of conveying disaster management. The study concurs with Bogdanor (1999:73) who avers that such fraught devolution is just but a 'mystery tour' characterised by a lack of political will to put it into practice.

DEVOLUTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION: GRASSROOTS LEVELS.

The study also sought to understand how grassroots populations of the district viewed and perceived devolution and human rights. It emerged that giving power and responsibilities to the indigenous communities reduces the impact of disasters and enables early response. Study respondents in Chimanimani had vivid memories of how Cyclone Eline and Cyclone Idai caused the loss of life and property. The local people believed that the impact of the disaster could have been minimal had the community at the village level had structures that spearheaded response activities. The paucity in having village structures resulted in haphazard ways of responding. One villager said:

> In the absence of village or ward committees dedicated to disaster risk reduction, we are left unprepared and are caught unaware as we respond haphazardly and use rudimental formulas. If supported, the efforts of village or neighbourhood committees would avert the loss of life and property when disasters strike.

The above narrative represents a common response from villagers in the Chimanimani District. In this regard, it is clear that a devolved disaster management approach promotes human life and dignity by taking up local views, interests and needs. Several studies confirm that before disasters occur, the most important thing in preparedness is to give priority to local people's needs and wants, aspirations and views about the anticipated problems, which according to Have (2018) is a form of promotion of human rights. Common threads reflected in the views and perceptions of local populations in the district show that the generality of the population knows about the role of government, its limitations in terms of empowering them and their responsibilities as citizens. However, they expressed a common view that they do not want to be relocated from the flood prone areas because these are their ancestral territories, hence, they represented a form of identity as Ndau people in Chimanimani represented by the following narrative:

> We pray that government and other donor agencies do not forget about us in times of crisis. That is the moment when we are at our weakest but in the general we take care of ourselves. We were born in this environment and have the right to live here as natives.

IKS! WHOSE KNOWLEDGE MATTERS IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT?

In Chimanimani, the study noted the existence of indigenous knowledge systems about many aspects of community life and that of the flood early warning systems. The local people at the village level were not only conversant but put to use the early warning systems, however in an uncoordinated manner. Research respondents in Chimanimani highlighted that in the 2019 Cyclone Idai excessive rains, local elders were able to share with other community members about the coming rains that would cause floods, based on indigenous knowledge systems. Through an in-depth interview process, the study established that community elders and spiritual leaders had discouraged the setting up of the Kopa settlement right at the lowest levels of a valley based on their indigenous knowledge systems. They argued that the Rural District Council went on to build a settlement at a site that was discouraged by local 'traditional connoisseurs;' those considered knowledgeable about the traditions by right of their position as autochthonous (Fontein, 2006: 47). This is the

same settlement which was exposed to vagaries of floods and was washed away by the cyclone Idai. However, the study realised that such sentiments and local knowledge about the early warnings do not reach the District Disaster Committee; hence, devolving disaster management to grassroots levels becomes imperative. One of the village elders said,

> Even if we were to tell them, do you think those officials will act on that? They only believe in modern science and as such, their knowledge is dependent on what they hear through radio, newspapers and government communiques. But depending on those things what was the result?

On the other side, many local people did not receive early warnings about the coming of heavy rains from the official systems of radio and District Disaster Committees. The study respondents retorted that if the disaster management system was devolved to village and ward levels, the magnitude of the impact of the disaster was to be minimal. The study established that rural communities have a wealth of indigenous knowledge that may be deployed as early warning systems but because disaster management and preparedness is top-down, their knowledge is left redundant. What rights do local people have in terms of participation and inclusion in disaster preparedness? How prepared were the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Centre (DDPC) in previous disasters and is there any capacitation of rural people?

What remains outstanding is the merging of bureaucratic and scientific systems and indigenous knowledge in disaster management at the local level. In this regard, capacity building ought to be approached from more than one angle; capacitating the indigenous people at the grassroots level so that they become appreciative of the science of disasters and the capacitation of the district committees by the indigenous knowledge experts. According to Hermansson (2019), when capacity building is approached and done from a holistic perspective, it factors in people's livelihoods, which is a form of attending to people's human rights. Mavhura and Mapuva (2021) observed that when resources are brought aboard in a participatory approach for building community resilience, that approach to disaster and risk management easily attends and satisfy the citizenry's human rights.

THE GENDERED HUMANITARIAN AND RECONSTRUCTION PHASE

This section focuses on how the administration of social welfare services was and is handled during and after the disaster in Chimanimani, with consideration of the gender matrix. The study holds the World Bank's (2012) postulation that gender is the relations between men and women, the apportionment of roles and responsibilities between them based on social constructions. Based on this definition, the study argues that the rights of women, girls and boys are part of the gender matrix in disaster management. The study findings showed that the provision of welfare and humanitarian services in the district was not only controlled from a centralised point but was also gender neutral. In this context, the study views gender neutrality as the avoidance or inability to distinguish roles between men and women in accordance with their sex (Oakley, 1998). The services that were provided to the victims of disasters in the district in question, that is, food aid, clothes and reconstruction of infrastructure, temporary shelter as well as health services were targeted at households. There was a general silence about the sex and gender of the recipients. A case in point was the erection of a big tent during Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani that accommodated both males and females at the peak of the disaster. Women's privacy was infringed and some of their general needs were not quickly addressed, for example, the reproductive health services in the form of a supply of sanitary wear. Due to the centralised way of service delivery, women's hygienic wants were not considered by a centralised male-dominated administration.

The study also established that district disaster committees that handled humanitarian aid in Chimanimani were all chaired by male officers. The army had an overarching role that robbed the whole system of a sense of accountability. Local civilians viewed themselves as less adequate to take 'men in uniform' to account. One of the key informants indicated that Musasa Project humanitarian organisation provided over 19000 survivors psycho-social services to sexually exploited women and girls inclusive of indigenes of Chimanimani with reports that soldiers were implicated. Women and girls became more susceptible to gender based exploitation and exposure to transactional sex as a form of a negative coping system. In

the Chimanimani District, research participants complained about soldiers' behaviour as they were part of the management of welfare and humanitarian aid services. Based on military protocol, soldiers could get away with some unacceptable behaviours, hence, there were reported cases of abuse of office, mismanagement of provisions and sexual exploitation.

Once again, the study argues that when people at the grassroots level, that is, the village and the ward do not have control over social services and humanitarian aid, they become mere recipients, whose rights get infringed. More so, a major attitude that develops is the lack of a sense of ownership. When communities lose a sense of ownership of grass root development programmes such as food aid, they develop means and mechanisms of cheating the system. Based on the above, the study established that many disaster victims misrepresented facts about their household numbers to get more provisions. One interviewee had this to say:

> After all, the provisions come from Harare and outside the country from the donor agency. If I get away with it, it is my day.

It was not only a centralised control on the provision of humanitarian aid that was noted, the reconstruction processes of public infrastructure that included temporary and permanent bridges, houses, schools and clinics after the floods were done by builders, carpenters and general labourers from outside the districts. While the efforts of central and local government were commendable, there was too much evidence of the local indigenous people being bystanders in the reconstruction. Specialist service providers like engineers could come from elsewhere but general labourers were supposed to be constituted of local indigenous people. The assumption and sentiment amongst the local population were that labourers and others with artisanal skills were supposed to be from the local communities as a way of rebuilding their livelihoods which in this study are their basic human rights.

A special reference case for the Chimanimani District was about reported cases of communities being provided with expired food items. While it sounded like an ethical dilemma aspect of disaster management, the

argument sustained in this write-up is that if a devolved disaster management system was in place, the locals themselves were going to manage the issues differently.

> Some of the donated food to the victims of Cyclone Idai was expired. I remember being given expired tinned beans, cooking oil and mealie meal. As a family, we had no option but to consume such food given the severity of hunger and skyrocketing prices in shops.

There were also scenarios where donations to Cyclone Idai victims were dehumanising such as being given tattered clothes and oversized clothes. A key informant interviewed said local structures are key in eliminating dehumanising elements in disaster response. He had this to say:

> The good thing about having local indigenous committees is that they can vet the utility of donations to the communities. For instance, with reference to clothes local committees can do a great job with regards to distribution according to sizes since they know each other.

In the literature review section above, the study showed that local people's participation in mainstream development remains on the margins, especially in remote districts. This is also the same scenario with disaster management in Chimanimani. Similar observations were made by Bongo *et al.* (2013) that current disaster management structures and systems in Zimbabwe do not promote the participation of the indigenous people. Mavhura (2016) further takes up the argument and points out that giving power and responsibilities to local communities through their committees enables the participation of the communities in disasters. This was raised by a village head who said:

> We know our communities very well, more than any outsider. We know the factors that expose us to disaster. Responsibilities including resources should be delegated to us to deal with these issues. I am against a scenario of the top government structures always taking the lead when disasters occur. We should be at the forefront of responding to disasters in our villages and wards. We need local structures that represent our needs in DRR.

Recent disasters that occurred in the Chimanimani District resulted in people losing their property including identity documents, as such reconstruction and recovery efforts ought to ensure the recovery of such important documents that relate to individual identity (Have, 2018).

THE FINANCIALS AND BUDGETARY CONUNDRUMS

One of the key issues that emerged from the research interlocutors, particularly the key informants was limited budget allocation to the Department of Civil Protection that affected the necessary operations. In the district, despite their dire need for financial support from the central government, they did not receive that much. The budget allocation for the period 2012-2018 showed the department received far little funds that translated to nothing reaching the grassroots communities to build their resilience. By the time of engaging in fieldwork, the district of Chimanimani did not have even a vehicle dedicated to disaster management. They continued to rely on other line ministries' benevolence when it comes to coordination. Devolving to the village-level communities entails transference of responsibilities and financial resources so that those communities strengthen their resiliencies and livelihoods. A key informant interviewed had this to say:

> The impact of disasters can be truly reduced if local communities are given a space to participate in DRR. I foresee a challenge of resources. As it stands now, there are resources constraints in DRR in Zimbabwe

This finding concurs with (Mavhura, 2016; Kasdam and Kim, 2017; Chatiza, 2019) who argue that as long as the responsibility of managing resources is not transferred to the grassroots, devolution remains a 'pipe dream'. Chatiza (2019) expresses the same sentiment and highlights that the Government of Zimbabwe over relies on donor agencies and financial help from the UN family which is not a good sign for the government's commitment to allocate resources to issues that affect those on the margins.

CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted critical issues regarding the devolution of disaster management in Zimbabwe by focusing and interrogating what happened in the Chimanimani district which is prone to disasters. Reflections on the existent disaster management system showed that mere decentralised disaster management systems that are confined to national, provincial and end at district levels are far from being a form of devolution. Despite the provisions of the Constitution on devolution that are meant to promote the rights of those on lower levels of society, very

little commitment has been shown besides being discussed on national television. Zimbabwe continues to have a weak disaster management system from the perspective of disaster devolution and the promotion of the rights of those in communities that are affected by such disasters. Communities' rights to participate in planning, designing and implementing disaster risk reduction systems remain peripheral as the contemporary system remains top-down in its approach. The study has argued that locals and indigenous people especially in rural communities deploy agentic behaviour when disasters occur and do not remain complacently waiting for the government. Locals deploy their own networks and social capital for helping each other and the same localised systems are used by exogenous institutions and agencies. The study argues that the coming of an exogenous agency to work with localised systems and structures is evidence that local people are not taken aboard to participate in issues that affect them, hence, their local knowledge, interests, needs and rights remain downtrodden. Disaster management as evidenced by the empirical data from Chimanimani continues to take indigenous people in the villages as passive recipients and receivers of charity. Such an approach has contributed to the abuse of women, girls and other vulnerable groups' rights as a centralised system of disaster management is deployed. Thus, the study recommends that the Government of Zimbabwe reflects and revisits its conceptualisation of devolution not only for disaster management but in many aspects of administration with the view of adhering to the supreme law of the country and international conventions on rights for which it is a signatory.

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