



## COMMUNITY TOLERANCE RECONCILIATION AND DEVELOPMENT

# POSITION PAPER

## Escalating fresh piped water woes in Masvingo urban

### Introduction

The scarcity of fresh water is rapidly becoming a nightmare amongst urban residents in Zimbabwe, and, Masvingo urban is no exception.<sup>1</sup> The current macro and micro economic state of affairs is offering a direct contradiction to the locally and universally agreed standards about people's rights to access safe and adequate water. Access to safe, and adequate water is vividly enshrined in the constitutions of many international institutions who are the champions and watchdogs of human security which is fortified by observance of certain human rights and privileges. As good case here is of the IWA (International Water Association), 2004, who agreed and set a blue print which emphasized the strong need to accord human beings exclusive rights to safe and adequate water supply.<sup>2</sup> One of their important resolution extracted from their main document says;

*Access to good, safe and reliable drinking water is one of the most basic needs of human society and as such requires integrated approach, close cooperation and partnerships between all stakeholders.*

Furthermore, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals, (SDGs), and the Human development Index (HDI), have in their areas of jurisdiction indicated the strong need to consider availability, accessibility, and affordability of clean and adequate water supply as a priority in the whole discourse of human security. All these considerations are emerging against the back drop water scarcity and unaffordability particularly in expansively expanding urban areas in less economically developed countries. It is against this background

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<sup>1</sup> Chigwenya A (2010). "Decentralization without devolution and its impacts on service delivery: the case of Masvingo municipality in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* (Volume 12, No.1, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> <https://iwa-network.org/>

that, this position paper offers an insightful state of affairs ongoing in the provision of fresh water in Masvingo urban. It also highlights intriguing ongoing conflicts and contestations amongst the citizens and the responsible authorities in the strive of providing and accessing of the precious water. The paper is presented guided by the following main objectives:

- To give a brief background of water supply and its quality in various residential areas Masvingo urban.
- To highlight the causes of scarcity of piped water.
- To identify how the urban residents are coping up with water scarcity.
- To unearth the contestations and conflicts amongst different stake holders who are concerned / involved in the supply of safe water.
- To offer recommendations earmarked to improve the supply of safe and affordable water.

### **Background of piped water supply in Masvingo urban**

The current episodes on the provision of safe and adequate water in Masvingo urban needs to be understood in the context of underlying history of the city, and, Zimbabwe in general. Masvingo city relies on raw water drawn from Lake Mutirikwi which is controlled by ZINWA (Zimbabwe National Water Authority). In addition, water from this lake is also used for irrigating sugarcane estates in Triangle and Hippo Valley, hence, sometimes affecting the availability of raw water for urban consumption in Masvingo city, especially during dry seasons. However, the major problem which affected water supply in most Zimbabwean cities including Masvingo worsened in 2005.<sup>3</sup> It is on the record that, the problems escalated when the government of Zimbabwe without proper planning, consultations and consideration arbitrarily transferred the mandate of managing the supply of water from the city council to ZINWA. Unfortunately, it emerged that ZINWA found themselves in more problems as they didn't have the perceived capacity to put the issues of water scarcity to rest. After four unsuccessful years of strife in water provision, the government intervened again, and, transferred back the responsibilities of supplying water to the towns' municipalities. Worryingly, the occurrence of these inadequately planned moves worsened the water shortages, and, as if it's not enough, the exercise led to the dilapidation and vandalization of the water supply infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The unconsensual abrupt handover and takeover of operations and management led to the serious breakdown and confusion over the supply of safe and adequate water in urban areas. On this account, the heavy presence of the government in directing the handover and takeover, negatively contributed to water scarcity even during those times when water levels in the lake are normal.

### **Safe water situation in Masvingo urban**

In Masvingo urban, the supply of clean and adequate water is erratic and intermittent. In worst case scenarios, the residents can go for as long as a week or two without running water in their homesteads.<sup>5</sup> The persistence of acute water shortages has left majority of the resident in serious

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<sup>3</sup> Mapfumo A and Madesha W M. (2014). Challenges for urban water supply: A case of Masvingo Municipality in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Economic Resources*. Vol 5-13 pp 01-05.

<sup>4</sup> Concern Worldwide, (2009), "Review of Garden-Based Learning: school gardens, agricultural education, nutrition education", Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools, Harare: Concern Worldwide.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2018/09/09/masvingo-grapples-with-acute-water-shortage>

panic mode about their welfare particularly the healthy security. It can be noted that these condition are greatly threatening their healthy security as they are directly coerced to sometimes rely on water harvested from unsafe sources which are perhaps contaminated, and, may subsequently subject them a plethora of waterborne diseases. Notably, majority of the urban residents are exposed to catastrophic diseases such as cholera, diarrhea and typhoid. Usually, the poor resourced urban residents in Masvingo have no money to treat the contaminated water on their own, and, more so, the option of boiling the water is out of the equation since there is no electricity. The option of boiling the water using firewood is perilous because of the prolonged load shedding from the power supplying company which is the Zimbabwe Electricity Transmission & Distribution Company (ZETDC).<sup>6</sup> In the absence of electricity, firewood has become another critical resource as a source of power amidst of unavailability of electricity and unaffordability of household gas for domestic use. Resultantly, the poor resourced and less privileged citizens who fell victims to waterborne diseases suffers a lot and in many cases they die because they cannot afford the appropriate medication or accessing treatment from the private clinics and hospitals due to high costs. The option of accessing medical help from public clinics and hospitals is out of question since they are always lacking adequate and affordable drugs for the vulnerable majority.

On the other hand, the general flow of piped water in Masvingo urban is somehow compromised. In cases where the city council supply water, the trends indicates that, it is usually pumped at night, mostly midnight and dries up at dawn. With these unstable and unfriendly times at hand, the water have been sarcastically, referred to as, ‘nocturnal water’ since it appears and disappears at night. With these nocturnal water trends, Masvingo case remains a mystery, and, an untold story in the history of vulnerability to shocks and stresses emerging from water woes. On record, studies done elsewhere have indicated that the consequences of water scarcity usually have unfavorable consequences to humanity. For example, a case drawn from Harare in 2008 showed that cholera killed more than 5 000 people and sickened more than 83 631.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, waiting for these undesirable episodes to hit Masvingo is one of the unwanted trends in the progressing human development scale, and, should be avoided at whatever cost.

However, the vulnerability trends to erratic water supplies in Masvingo is not uniform across all residential suburbs since some suburbs are worst affected than others. For instance, the worst affected residential suburbs are Runyararo West, and, the other recently established suburbs namely, Victoria Range and ZEXCOM (commonly known as kwaMbudzi). The development of Victoria Range and ZEXCOM brings some contestations in the provision of basic amenities in Masvingo urban. Some residents complained that, they should not have been established since they were born out of a series of urban land grabs by the politically backed land barons from the ruling party ZANU PF. As explained, the partitioning and selling of the land to the general public increased pressure on the city council’s direct fulfillment of their mandate of supplying water and sewer services. On the other hand, some commentators said the move was noble since it catered for accommodating the exponentially growing but unofficially noticed population in Masvingo.

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.bing.com/search?q=zesa+load+shedding+and+water+provison+in+masvingo&form=EDNTHT&mkt=e-n-gb&httpsmsn=1&refig=fa86945ed6f94d0ae77c92bf6d67d51f&PC=HCTS&sp=-1&pq=zesa+load+shedding+and+water&sc=0-28&qs=n&sk=&cvid=fa86945ed6f94d0ae77c92bf6d67d51f>

<sup>7</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/water-crisis-zimbabwe>

A response from the city council reflected a reserved and conservative response to the escalating water woes in the city, but, nevertheless, they complained that, the politically driven land grabs left the city council grounded as they were failing to service the new residential areas. Owing much to the city council's failure is the fact that they never received any money from the land sold by the land barons. As a result, these two added suburbs lacked the proper planned infrastructure which include piped water, sewer system and roads. Albeit the hustles and tussles between the politicians and the city council, the new owners of land never stopped developing their houses, and, they have been doing all this using their own sources of water. Consequently, these two residential areas automatically become the worst affected because of some controversies surrounding their inclusion into the city council's conventional water and other amenities supply system. Drawing insights from these episodes, it can be noted that, the absence of proper planning negatively affects the normal trends of demand and supply of water in Masvingo urban. In addition, the drastic increase of residential suburbs also increase the strain on the 'decades old pumping system' in the Bushmead.<sup>8</sup> To this end, the dilapidated water pumping systems is seen failing to cope up with the exponentially increasing demand for water.

The conflicts of water supply between the citizens and the city council has reached undesirable levels. In one of the ugly scenes, in 2018, the city council was taken to the High Court of Zimbabwe in Masvingo by Masvingo Urban Residents and Ratepayers Alliance (MURRA) for the failed water supply.<sup>9</sup> The civic organization sued the city council for neglecting their responsibility in fulling one of the most delicate human right of accessing clean and adequate water as enshrined in the constitution of Zimbabwe. Responding to the mounting challenges, the city council decided to supply water to the worst affected residential suburbs using bowsers.<sup>10</sup> Though the move sounded noble in acknowledging the dire need for water, the intervention process was perceived as a 'modest' response or a 'palliative care' to the long standing problems of water woes in Masvingo urban. The city council's bowser system does not commensurate with the trends of demand and consumption of water in worst affected residential suburbs. As a result, critics have labeled the city council's intervention as a mockery to the residents since they view it as an inconsiderate move to the satisfaction of the majority's immediate demand for water. Also noted is the fact that the bowser water system have generated more problems than solutions to water woes. In this regard, the following problems have been witnessed;

- It is highlighted that, the timing of water supply using bowsers was not consistent and also does not factor in the presence and absence of the working class in both formal and informal sectors. Many times, those working class are expected to abscond from their duties so that they can fetch water and this back and forth behavior negatively affects their output in various workplaces.
- In the ques, it has been also noted that serious conflicts or social altercations erupt from time to time as people will be fighting for the scarce water, and, in the end, it affects the smooth and equitable sharing of water.
- The quantity of the water they get is not enough to cater for all their domestic needs which comprise washing, cooking, drinking, bathing and using in toiles. Conflicts and

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/water-crisis-hits-masvingo-residents-without-supplies-for-a-week/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/09/residents-take-masvingo-to-high-court-over-persistent-water-cuts/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2018/09/09/masvingo-grapples-with-acute-water-shortage>

competition usually increase in those households which accommodate more than one family.

- On hygiene, the erratic water supply negatively affect women's reproductive healthy particularly those that are experiencing their periodic mensuration cycles.
- School going children's health and learning is also negatively affected by water scarcity both at home and school.
- At workplaces, unavailability of water affects both the formal and informal workers and their productive capacity is hugely compromised since one of the major important source of relief is strained.

Generally, unavailability of adequate and safe water is causing anguish, increased panic mode and vulnerability of urbanites in Masvingo. Apart from getting inadequate water from the bowser systems, majority of the citizens often fetch water from open wells and boreholes. The boreholes in Masvingo urban were sunk some years back by ACTION FAIM an NGO which was embarking on nutritional garden projects aimed at cushioning vulnerable people with ill health conditions.<sup>11</sup> Indirectly and unconsciously, the boreholes are now acting as service centers for the majority of citizens faced with serious water challenges. Unfortunately, the boreholes have never been tested to confirm if the water is not contaminated, or fit for human consumption. As a result, the majority are vulnerable to more complex diseases as they are battling to access water for various domestic uses. With this situation at hand, the residents have lost hope on whether their predicament will ever be solved or gather a momentum in the future as this threatens their daily health and human rights.

### **Scapegoating and hypocrisy on managing water woes in Masvingo urban**

The persistence of water woes in Masvingo urban has opened a can of worms, strife, accusations and rejections amongst the authorities. As it appears, there is much finger pointing, blaming and, 'handing each other a live snake' as to who is responsible for the catastrophic water woes as well as, who should manage them.<sup>12</sup> Any attempts to solve these problems are going back and forth due to somehow perceived diffusion of responsibilities and excessive intrusion amongst the authorities. The bone of contention on this matter largely falls amongst the authorities who are namely, the city council, the Ministry of Local Government, ZINWA and ZETDC.<sup>13</sup> All these authorities have both a direct and indirect influence on the provision or non-provision of water for the urban residents. These authorities are reflecting divergent, and, somehow conflicting responses on who is responsible for the task at hand.

1. Masvingo city council blames the government for its failure to give the council the needed support in the provision of water. The council calls for total devolution where they are left with the total mandate of superintending over water provision without reporting to the government. More so, the city council blamed the government for lacking the 'political will' since it is a sole proprietor of authority which allows them to make sensible decisions which can benefit the urban residents. For instance, the government is

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<sup>12</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/water-crisis-zimbabwe>

<sup>13</sup> World Bank, (2007), Delivering on the Pro-poor Growth. Insights and Lessons from country experiences, Washington DC: Macmillan.

blamed for the collapsed deal with the Chinese company which once offered to help the city council with an alternative pump which was earmarked to provide a substantive solution to the old pumping system at Bushmead water works.<sup>14</sup> The collapse of the deal was heavily blamed on the government's ineptness in fighting corruption, and its bureaucratic inefficiencies which automatically stifle the potential of goodwill in handling these delicate matters. Furthermore, the city council also blamed the government for allowing land barons to grab and sell land to the public, hence forcing the emergence of unplanned and unbudgeted for residential areas. The city council also complained for not receiving any money from the sold state land, and yet, they were only directed to service and deliver a normal benefits to these areas and the whole the town. These residential areas are seen causing a serious strain on the underfunded city council's budget as well as increasing unwarranted pressure on the static and dilapidating council water supply infrastructure. Resultantly, the city council has been receiving constant attacks and criticisms from the general public for inefficiency, but, they fight back and cast the blame on the local government.<sup>15</sup>

2. ZINWA's position in this scenario is not as complex when compared to others. In their own accord, they just control and regulate the use and preservation of water as they are tasked to do so by the government. ZINWA have also given a green light to Masvingo city council to act in appropriate manner in supplying clean water to the urbanites.
3. ZETDC is not directly involved in the supply of water, but are receiving constant attacks from the city council and the general public. The city council blamed them for their failure to provide electricity which is the only source of power used for pumping raw water from the dam and the purified to the residential suburbs. The city council also pointed out that, the extensive load shedding project was affecting their projected water supply plans, and, this is the reason why water remains nocturnal since they pump it at night when electricity is back.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the ZETDC and the general public suggested a noble idea that the city council should try to improvise an alternative solar system for them to continue pumping water to the residential suburbs. On the contrary, the city council refuted the suggestion, and, cast the blame on the government for not financing the solar projects since it superintends over critical decisions which involve budgeting and infrastructural development. Despite the suggestion looking good in its design, it still remains in limbo with no knowledge whether this view will come to pass one day.
4. Ministry of Local Government is the overseer of all local business and deals which concerns human welfare and provision of basic local amenities. However, the general observed trend is that, this government ministry have both direct and indirect influence on the outcome of service provision and chief among them controlling the city council in service provision to the general public. The main noted problem is that, the battle between the two is more political rather than professional contact. As noted, the city

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2018/03/23/masvingo-residents-protest-road-levy>

<sup>15</sup> Curry E (2010). Water Scarcity and the Recognition of the Human Right to Safe Freshwater, Nw.J.Int'lHum.Rts.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bing.com/search?q=zimstats+2012&form=EDGEAR&qs=PF&cvid=e262e1a29697496b8001e6fd8fffe491&cc=ZW&setlang=en-GB&PC=HCTS>

council is managed mainly by personnel who are put in power by the electorate, and, in Masvingo the council is dominated by MDC councilors and the mayor.<sup>17</sup> The ZANU PF run ministry therefore, is always at loggerheads with the opposition party administration hence causing unabated water woes in the city. The ministry always take a swipe on the administration citing incompetency and mismanagement as the root causes of water problems. On the contrary, the city council lamented on the constant interference on how they should manage their daily business.<sup>18</sup> For example, it has been brought to attention that, then the former Minister of Local Governance Dr. Ignatius Chombo during the 2013 harmonized elections campaign, he instructed all city and town councils to cancel all debts owned by urban residents. Worryingly, he instructed that all debts in respect of rentals, unit tax and development, refuse charges and water and sewer should be cancelled retrospectively from 2009. The populist stance was a wrongly calculated move since it directly crippled the city council's activities in service provision. The councils suffered the backlash up to today since they failed to recover the money for the services which they have rendered to the general public. These politically motivated decisions have been seen crippling the city council's potential in consolidating the available resources as they strive to provide the precious water to the thirsty and vulnerable urbanites.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Water is a political resource, and its availability or lack of it thereof, breeds a fertile ground for constant fights, raising issues of human health and human rights. The worst affected people are vulnerable to multiple threats such as diseases which increase many cases of morbidity and mortality. In overall, the management of water supply in urban areas needs a serious consideration, participation and equal representation of concerned stakeholders who can make sure that decisions and actions taken benefits majority of the less privileged and poor resourced urban citizens.

## **Recommendations**

1. Devolution - the government should wean the local authorities like city councils to manage their finances, business and making decisions and adjustments which enables them to fulfill their legal mandate.<sup>20</sup> Given this opportunity, the authorities may make positive moves which allows them to expand and refurbish the water pumping systems without any debilitating bureaucratic process from the government.
2. The city council should consider the option of establishing a solar panel plant to stand as an alternative to unavailable electricity so as to reduce intermittent water supply.<sup>21</sup>
3. The government should allow the city council to forge links and partnerships with both private and public players who are eager and have the capacity to transform the processes of water provision in Masvingo urban.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://oapub.org/soc/index.php/EJSS/article/view/505>

<sup>18</sup> <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-national-byo-33609-article-MDC-T+against+slashing+of+tariffs.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2015/02/21/rate-slashing-backfires>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/water-devolution-begins-with-4-municipalities/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2019/07/21/power-short-zim-removes-barriers-solar-energy-expansion/>

4. The government should also incorporate the city council in making critical decisions like expanding the urban residential suburbs to avoid unplanned and mismatched demand and supply trends on service provision of critical services such as water and sewer systems.
5. The government should also consider the option that the newly constructed Tokwe Mukosi dam to be directed towards irrigating sugarcane estates in Triangle and Hippo Valley whilst Mutirikwi dam service Masvingo urban. This move may help in reducing cases of dropping water levels which is also one of the challenges which sometimes affect the city council in pumping raw water particularly during seasons with below normal rain fall amounts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup><https://www.thezimbabwedaily.com/news/187526-tokwe-mukosi-irrigation-study-complete.html>