

Urban Struggles over Water Scarcity in Harare

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ginning of the twentieth century, they raised concerns about the sanitation and health dangers associated with the prolonged usage of groundwater and the widespread utilization of bucket and pit latrines.¹²

Demographic growth and adverse topographical features, highlighted above, compelled the city authorities to resort to water storage initiatives and to turn away from dependency on groundwater. Since water for urban uses was derived from rainfall, the city lost the bulk of its water through uncontrolled runoff or from what simply vanished into the depths of the earth during the annual dry seasons, causing regular water shortages. These shortages led to plans to construct large-scale reservoirs. Thus, the first ever dam for Harare, Cleveland Dam, was built in 1913, seven miles to the east on the headwaters of the Mukuvisi River, with a capacity of 200 million gallons.¹³ With the establishment of the Cleveland waterworks, it became possible for city authorities to dispense water through pipes to the European suburbs, businesses, and industrial sites.

Intensified water uses for domestic, industrial, and urban construction as well as recurring droughts revealed that the Cleveland Dam could not always guarantee sufficient water.¹⁴ The council therefore built the 600-million-gallon Prince Edward Dam on the Manyame River. This ensured a more reliable water supply for White residents until the immediate aftermath of World War II when an even bigger dam, forming Lake Mcllwaine, was built on the Hunyani River southwest of the city.¹⁵ A gigantic water purification plant—the Morton Jaffray Waterworks—was constructed in 1954 on the Hunyani River adjacent to the lake.¹⁶ By the early 1970s, Lake Mcllwaine was meeting 95 percent of Harare’s water requirements.¹⁷ It was not until the mid-1980s when the preexisting Darwendale Dam, downstream of the Hunyani River, was enlarged and connected to the purification plant.¹⁸

Guaranteed water supplies allowed the rapid development of several upper-income European residential suburbs in the northern and northeastern areas of the city, such as Highlands, Borrowdale, Malborough, and Alexandra Park. Splendid houses, fitted with water pipes inside and outside, with at least one bathroom and toilet, were built on more than one-acre stands with large, manicured, well-watered gardens. Most White homeowners had their own swimming pools, which earned Harare “the dubious honor as the city with the greatest density of swimming pools in the world.”¹⁹ As British novelist David Caute writes in *The Secret Garden*, “by 1963 one out of every five families in Salisbury had installed its own swimming pool.”²⁰ Even though these suburbs had low population densities, the single-story detached houses had extraordinarily spacious living conditions. On average, such dwellings had four-to-five rooms and often housed 3.6 persons—reflecting, in the words of geographers George Kay and M. Cole, “a way of life that is expensive to obtain and maintain,” adding that “the material environment of the northern suburbs provides no place for the poor.”²¹ Due to the colonial state’s policy of racial and urban residential segregation, the northern suburbs were no place

for Africans regardless of class status unless they were domestic workers allowed to live on their premises in the “boys’” .²²

Development scholar Irene Mudeka captures this disparity between European and African conditions quite well as she underscores the centrality of differential access to water:

Urban planners . . . set up European suburbs such as Mount Pleasant, Vainona, Queensdale, Hatfield and Bluffhill among others and endowed them with permanent, durable, brightly lit and beautiful homes of low density and with a myriad of entertainment venues, restaurants, baths, parks as well as other trappings of civilization. Unlike the African shanty townships which relied on very limited communal water taps, the European suburbs also enjoyed clean piped water systems installed all the way from Cleveland and Seke Dams.²³

The asymmetrical provision of water between European and African residential places generated fundamentally distinct environmental outlooks, the former spectacularly green all year round and the latter unkempt and green only when the summer rains fell. Thus, a deeply divided colonial city for Europeans and Africans emerged along racial, spatial, and income lines. What was typical of the European side of the city— that is, privilege and affluence— was a far cry from the African townships created through deprivation and White paternalism.²⁴

To put the latter point into perspective, it is worth emphasizing that since 1890, the colonial state practiced a “Native Policy” of racial, economic, cultural, political, territorial, and spatial segregation. This policy was later codified into law as the Land Apportionment Act (1930), which formalized the set-aside towns and industrial areas as exclusive domains of European occupation. Simultaneously, it allocated all the unwanted, often ecologically depressed, urban land for the controlled habitation of Africans, though that land remained European-owned.²⁵ In the first decades of colonial rule, African residential places were provided with meager resources and amenities on the rationale that African migrants were temporary sojourners and were only in the city to minister to the needs of the White man. When done, they were expected to return to their rural homes. There was, therefore, no need to provide them with all the essentials of a civilized life.²⁶ This is the basis on which the creation of African townships needs to be understood. Alongside the racial and territorial division of land, the colonial state instituted the 1927 Water Act (later revoked by the 1976 Water Act) and conferred all water rights to the segregationist state. Access to water rights were now affixed to land ownership.²⁷ Because Africans had been dispossessed of their lands, they were automatically ineligible for water rights in urban (and rural) areas where they now lived on European-owned land. Thus, by law, Africans in Harare’s townships had no rights to water. Whatever access they had was at the “mercy” of the city council and the state.

Africans arriving in Harare in pursuit of employment were moved to Mbare, the first formal secluded residential area earmarked for Africans in 1892. They were subsequently moved in October 1907 to the site where Mbare presently stands. Located five miles southwest of the town center and on the banks of the Mukuvisi River, the township bore all the hallmarks of segregation: it was located in unpleasant surroundings, that is, adjacent to the town's animal slaughtering post; in proximity to the city's sanitary facilities, which oozed pungent odors; and below the burial ground for White people, though concealed from view by a strip of trees.²⁸ On the fifty-acre site, the council constructed from round, corrugated tanks an assortment of fifty Kaytor huts with thatched roofs, and a brick barrack of four rooms. African residents soon christened the huts "Ma Tank."²⁹ By 1914, the number of Kaytor huts had risen to 156, and by the middle of the 1920s, the township consisted of 247 huts housing an estimated population of 760 people.³⁰ Around the same time, the state dispensed with the Kaytor huts. In Highfield, the state built the unpopular / (appeared like elephant backs) four-roomed brick houses as African migration to the city increased after World War II. More housing for Africans was provided between 1952 and 1976, as the government, municipality, and, to some extent, employers agreed to maintain stable labor supplies in the city as opposed to migrant labor. Several townships such as Mufakose, Kambuzuma, and Dzivarasekwa were built farther away from the city center and European suburbs but were close enough to places of work. The typical "small, box-like" houses were built "within individual plots, with a consequent lack of sizable open spaces for informal recreation, amenity and cultivation."³¹ A pervasive characteristic in all the townships was that these houses were regularly congested. Kay and Cole note that in 1969, about 97 percent of Harare's African population was accommodated in 65,070 houses comprising 162,130 rooms, thus an average of 1.7 people per room.³² The average home in the African township had four rooms divided into two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. Flows of water into these townships were controlled by the state. From Mbare to Highfield, "water distribution to Africans was parsimonious," asserted historian Eshmael Mlambo.³³

For sanitation and ablution necessities, Africans were to be content with using communal latrines. Unsurprisingly, many Africans found living conditions in the townships both oppressive and depressing. No one found these realities an affront to African dignity more than Bradfield Jacob Mnyanda, a Mfengu immigrant from South Africa and long-time resident of Mbare in the 1940s. Mnyanda rose to become the highest-ranking Black official in the Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department. He provided the first documented critique of the colonial state's Native Policy in his 1954 classic text, *Native Policy in Southern Rhodesia*. He was determined to galvanize the consciousness of his White readers to the exasperations and racial and environmental injustices piled upon, especially, the educated African elites, who were forced to live cheek-by-jowl with their poor brethren in degraded environmental settings no European would have tolerated: "Compared with the Europeans, even in the case of advanced Africans, urban native housing which, *like the European housing, includes latrines, dance and social halls, is poor in quality and in quantity.*"³⁸ Top on his mind was also the differential access to water, though surprisingly focused on swimming baths, which were plentiful in White suburbs: "it may be pointed out that while in almost each of our leading towns provision has been made a European public swimming bath, no similar arrangement exists for Africans in any part of the colony."³⁹ Of course, even if individual Africans from the elite class could have afforded private swimming baths, there was no space for them to build one given the tiny stands and limited water supplies available to them. Mnyanda was advocating for equal treatment with Whites as he clamored for the provision of the same public swimming baths in African townships as there were in European spaces. Mnyanda was understandably riled by the perennial unhygienic condition of the communal latrine in most townships in the colony:

The common latrines— which are in use in most urban native locations, townships or compounds— are kept in an extremely insanitary condition, possibly because the habits of many of their users are primitive in the extreme. These communal latrines are a menace to the health of the people and a disgrace to the Colony.⁴⁰

Mnyanda, however, extolled the Harare municipality for building individual latrines in the newest section of Mbare, "for an individual latrine can be kept clean because it is the sole responsibility of the tenant using it; whereas, in the case of the communal latrines, the attitude of many less advanced African people is that: 'everybody's business is nobody's business.'"⁴¹

Like Mnyanda, Lawrence Vambe, a Zimbabwean journalist, produced a similar sharp-tongued analysis of urban conditions for Africans in his 1976 classic, *Urban Conditions in Harare*, in which he documents the lived experiences of the different classes of Africans in Harare's townships and how the blunt instrument

of racial and residential segregation homogenized them. Vambe expresses how the African elite, Black moguls, and others

were forced to go to Harare (Mbare), the Highfield Village Settlement and the Mabvuku Township, where they were tenants just as all the other Africans, and they occupied the same confined, crowded houses, surrounded by muddy roads, communal lavatories and huge piles of smelling rubbish, that were left uncollected for weeks on end.⁴²

If anything, his book is an aide-mémoire documenting how little had changed

Chombo, fired him in April 2003 on trumped-up charges of ineptitude.⁵⁷ Instead of allowing the MDC-controlled council to appoint a replacement from among its ranks, the minister decreed that he be replaced by a ZANU-PF functionary, Seke-

new act also provided for the creation of a state water corporation, the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), to supervise the implementation of the new water-sector reforms sanctioned by both the IMF and World Bank, which underscored that water needed to be treated as an economic good and to be sold at a profit rather than as a “social good” whose cost of production was borne by the state. In 2005, the Cabinet ordered all urban municipalities to surrender all water-supply and sanitation functions, revenue-collection systems, and their engineers to ZINWA. Because Harare and other municipalities were financially dependent on water tariffs for the maintenance of water infrastructure and for the provision of social services to residents, this action naturally robbed the MDC council of much-needed revenue and led to its severe incapacitation. In 2006, under the supervision of the docile commission, ZINWA wrested the administration of water and sanitation from the Harare municipal council.

Harare residents, now accustomed to persistent water shortages, pipe bursts, and overflowing sewers in several townships, initially welcomed ZINWA in the fervent hope that it would resolve their pesky water problems. But after two years of ZINWA’s leadership, the residents of Harare had not reaped any significant benefits from the new parastatal as the state had claimed. Despite raising water rates for the residents on the presumption that this would enable it to meet its operational costs, water did not flow through the pipes and taps of most households. During this period, waterborne diseases, especially cholera, broke out regularly, for example, in Mabvuku and Tafara.⁶³

Before long, most Harare residents sympathetic to the MDC were quick to awaken to the ruling party’s political maneuverings and intentions.⁶⁴ As ZANU-PF intensified its strategy, forms of social protest began to surface. The first form of enduring social and political protest against ZANU-PF’s control of Harare’s municipal affairs has been MDC supporters consistently ousting it from power. From the municipal elections of 2002 until today (2021), ZANU-PF has failed to regain control of the urban municipalities. As a government, the ruling party has remained alienated from the urban people because of its dismal failure to tackle the very issues that saw it booted out of power in the first place: that is, the major service-delivery questions affecting them, and top of the list was frequent water shortages and poor sanitation. As urban studies scholar Amin Kamete notes, elections became one of the few remaining opportunities for the people to vent their indignation in an era in which democratic space was increasingly circumscribed by an insecure ruling party.⁶⁵ In between elections, residents protested the ruling party’s conduct. On March 20, 2007, for example, one hundred residents besieged Harare Town House calling for the dismissal of the commission that had been administering the city’s affairs for about twenty-seven months.⁶⁶ The residents also called for new municipal elections. Some of the protesters were members of a social movement organization called the Combined Harare Residents’ Associ-

ation (CHRA). Based in Harare and founded in 1999, CHRA has been involved in sustained struggles to advocate for the concerns of Harare's residents and "ensure enhanced civic participation in local government."⁶⁷ The CHRA chairperson leading the protest remarked: "Today, CHRA occupied the steps of Town House to send a clear message to the regime that Harare belongs to us, the residents of Harare. We will continue to demonstrate and hold other peaceful campaigns against the illegal commission until elections are held in Harare. VIVA CHRA!"⁶⁸ They demanded the ousting of the Harare commission after twenty-seven months of waning municipal governance services: "Roads are falling into a state of disrepair and water and electricity and refuse collection are becoming increasingly erratic."⁶⁹

The residents' disenchantment at the commission's lethargic performance was compounded by the news that ZINWA had taken over all water distribution responsibilities from the MDC-controlled councils. The residents, once again, represented by the CHRA, whose branches were in both low-density and high-density townships such as Mabvuku, Kuwadzana, Kambuzuma, Mufakose, and Highfield, clamored for the revocation of the capture of their duly elected council's responsibility, arguing that the move

further exposes the evil agenda of the regime towards urban citizens, particularly those living in Harare
and illegal since they intervene the parties involved, and no mandate from the residents.

It was not lost on the membership and executive of CHRA that the government's justification for ZINWA's takeover was insubstantial and flawed. In their lackluster performance: "It is a combination of bad policies, partisan political interference, technical and financial problems...the water system belongs to Harare and ZINWA does not own it." ZINWA does not own becoming illegitimate.

⁷¹ Jabusile Shumba, CHRA senior programs officer in charge of advocacy, the coming of ZINWA hegemony. In a meeting with residents, he stated that the coming of ZINWA was a political move. Residents continued as the Harare municipality was rendered nearly dysfunctional.

ZINWA's inability to mitigate the residents' chronic water shortages and

babwe experienced hyperinflation, an economic meltdown, the government's abuse of human rights against members of the opposition party, and a high unemployment rate, while Robert Mugabe and his party faced increasing international isolation due to, among other things, the violent land reform program that ejected White farmers from their farms.⁷⁷ Thus, the epidemic in many ways became a clear manifestation of the inability of the state and the local urban authorities to provide access to clean water and proper sanitation services.

A major political development in 2009 that promised to bring back economic recovery and hence the rehabilitation of Harare's water and sanitation infrastructure was the rapprochement between ZANU-PF and the MDC that resulted in the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU). Notwithstanding the continued tensions between the two parties, the GNU gave hope for peace and development to both citizens in Zimbabwe as well as the international community. Aid began to flow into the country, and for the five years of the GNU's existence, the country stabilized economically and attention was paid to the restoration and improvement of water and sanitation infrastructure. In 2009, ZINWA was ordered to stop discharging its responsibilities to urban areas after four years of poor administration of the city's water supplies. For all its attempts to restore and stabilize water supply and sanitation services with help from several donors and governments, the impact of the GNU's initiatives was short-lived when the coalition between ZANU-PF and the MDC ended in 2013. Instead, ZANU-PF pushed for elections in the hope that it would win and govern the country and the urban areas without a partnership with the MDC. As the election campaigns gathered momentum, the ZANU-PF government, presumably scared that the MDC would, once again, win municipal elections and continue to govern municipalities including Harare as it had done since 2000, intruded into municipal operation matters. This time, without consulting the urban councils, the minister of local government, Ignatius Chombo, issued a directive to all municipalities to set aside all the residents' municipal debts. This move was intended, firstly, to cast the ZANU-PF government as a "pro-poor" and caring people's party unlike the MDC and, secondly, to liquidate urban councils' finances, thus crippling their capacity to deliver services to their ratepayers and trigger dissatisfaction against the majority MDC councilors.

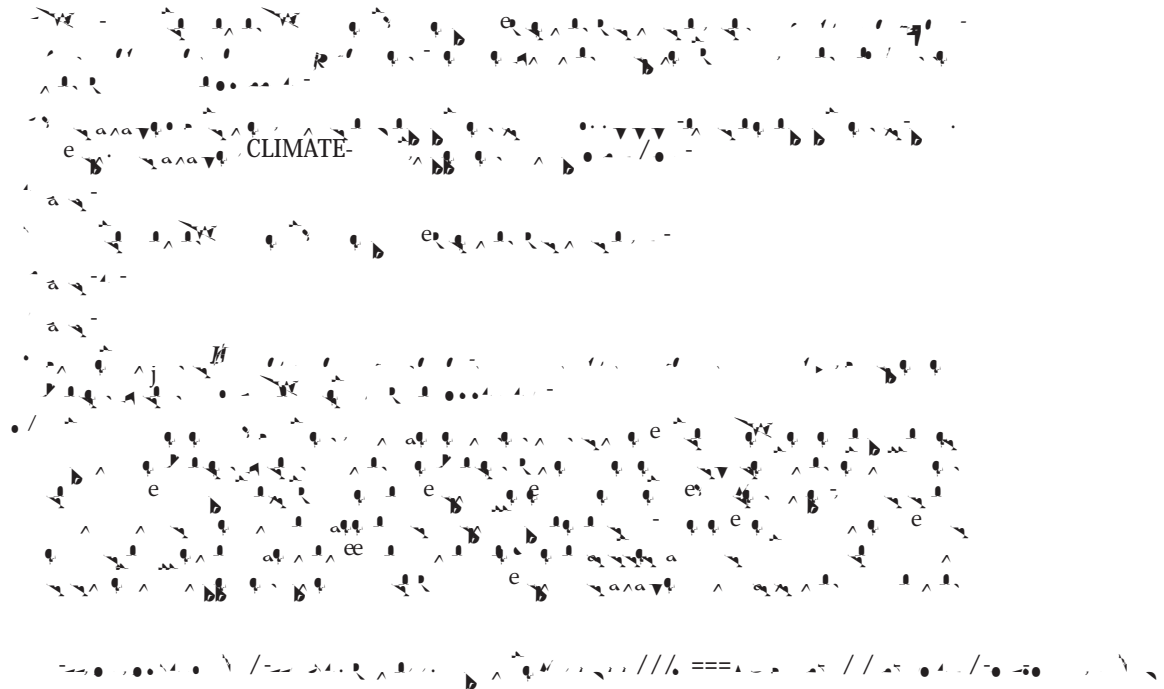
While ZANU-PF went on to win the parliamentary and presidential elections, it once again lost in the municipal elections. The minister of local government intensified his interference in the operations of the Harare city council, once again dominated by an MDC majority of councilors, until the Mugabe government was overthrown in a military coup in November 2017 that installed his former deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who he had removed.⁷⁸ All the economic gains that were becoming evident between 2009 and 2013 were quickly wiped out as ZANU-PF, now in control of the state, became more intolerant, and investors and donors simply withdrew their support for reforms. The period was characterized by

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water flows to the residents of Harare since 2000 simply dried up. Consequent-

ing jointly with the city council to come up with water development projects, the central state elected to circumscribe the activities of the MDC council in order to cast it to the urban populace as incompetent and not worthy of being voted back into power. But as urban voters kept returning the MDC council in all elections, so too did ZANU-PF intensify its authoritarian assaults. In the process, the political fight with the Harare municipal council, including the appointment of ZINWA as the urban water governing institution, and the dismissal of mayors and councilors achieved only one thing: the creation of perennially inadequate and erratic water and sanitation services, resulting in poor-quality water delivered through municipal taps to urban residents. It is without question that the outbreak of the cholera epidemic that decimated four thousand people, mostly in Harare, was eas-

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