

Cyclone Idai and the Gaps in Zimbabwe's Disaster Management Policy: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-induced disasters have exposed significant weaknesses in disaster management systems globally, particularly in developing countries. This paper critically examined the gaps in Zimbabwe's disaster management policy, using the 2019 Cyclone Idai as a case study. The cyclone caused widespread destruction in the Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, exposing the fragility of Zimbabwe's disaster preparedness and response systems. Guided by the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model and the Institutional Capacity Framework, the study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in policy analysis. Data were gathered through a systematic review of policy documents, government reports, academic literature and NGO publications to critically assess disaster governance structures and response mechanisms in the context of Cyclone Idai. The findings indicated that Zimbabwe's disaster governance was hindered by an outdated legislative framework—the Civil Protection Act of 1989—a lack of decentralised authority, poor integration of local coping strategies and inadequate investment in resilient infrastructure. Post-disaster recovery efforts were slow, poorly coordinated and heavily reliant on external aid, with limited community participation. Despite these challenges, informal support networks and traditional leadership structures played a critical role in immediate response and coping. The study recommended comprehensive legislative reform, improved coordination across all levels of government and the institutionalisation of community-based disaster risk reduction strategies.

Keywords: Cyclone Idai, disaster management, Zimbabwe, policy analysis, early warning systems, resilience, emergency response.

Introduction

The increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, exacerbated by climate change, underscored the need for effective disaster management systems globally. Evidence showed that both the number and severity of disasters rose sharply in recent decades, largely due to anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation. (IPCC, 2022; UNDRR, 2022; Cutter et al., 2008). These disasters exposed the limits of traditional response-oriented models of disaster management and highlighted the need for comprehensive frameworks that prioritised risk reduction, preparedness and institutional resilience. Within this context, countries with fragile or outdated governance systems were particularly vulnerable to catastrophic outcomes when hazards strike.

In March 2019, Cyclone Idai devastated parts of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, the cyclone caused extensive destruction, particularly in Chimanimani and

Chipinge districts, resulting in hundreds of deaths, the displacement of thousands and the collapse of key infrastructure. (ACAPS, 2019; UNDP, 2019; Xinhua, 2019). The scale and severity of the disaster raised urgent questions about the country's readiness for high-impact climate-related events and drew attention to long-standing issues in disaster governance. Although natural hazards like cyclones were inevitable, the degree of human impact they caused was heavily influenced by the robustness of the country's disaster management system (Wisner et al., 2004).

Disaster management encompassed a continuum of strategies, including mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. (UNDRR, 2015). It relies on institutional frameworks that could coordinate these functions effectively across different levels of governance. In many low- and middle-income countries, however, disaster management remained reactive, fragmented and underfunded (Mavhura, 2020). As climate change intensifies the frequency of extreme weather events, there was increasing consensus that disaster management systems evolved beyond emergency relief to incorporate proactive, risk-reduction strategies and long-term resilience planning. (Birkmann et al., 2010).

This paper drew on two theoretical frameworks to guide its analysis of Zimbabwe's disaster management context. The Pressure and Release (PAR) Model, developed by Wisner et al. (2004), helped to conceptualise disasters not merely as natural events, but as the intersection of environmental hazards with social, economic and institutional vulnerabilities. This model facilitated the examination of underlying causes and structural pressures that shaped risk exposure. In addition, the Institutional Capacity Framework offered a useful lens to explore how governance structures, policy instruments and administrative practices influenced disaster response and resilience. (Comfort, 2005).

In Zimbabwe, disaster risk management was governed primarily through the Civil Protection Act of 1989, a legislative framework developed over three decades ago. While the Act provided a foundation for national coordination of emergency responses, it was important to examine how well such legal instruments aligned with contemporary disaster risk governance needs. In recent years, global frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 redefined best practices in disaster management, emphasising decentralisation, inclusivity and proactive planning (UNDRR, 2015). Assessing how Zimbabwe's institutional and legislative structures related to these evolving international standards was essential to understanding the country's preparedness for future disasters.

It was within this broader context that Cyclone Idai served as a pivotal event to examine Zimbabwe's disaster management structures and policy environment. Rather than treating the cyclone as an isolated humanitarian emergency, this study positioned it as a lens through which to explore the institutional landscape that shaped preparedness, response and recovery efforts. The case provided valuable insights into how national disaster frameworks performed under the pressure of a large-scale, climate-exacerbated hazard.

This study was significant in that it contributed to a relatively under-researched area of disaster governance in Zimbabwe. While humanitarian agencies and media reports documented the devastation caused by Cyclone Idai, less scholarly attention was paid to the policy and institutional dimensions of the disaster. By focusing on these aspects, this paper addressed a critical knowledge gap and offers recommendations that might enhance future disaster preparedness and governance.

The importance of this analysis extended beyond Zimbabwe. As climate-related disasters increased across Sub-Saharan Africa, there was a need for evidence-based evaluations of existing disaster management systems. Lessons drawn from Zimbabwe's experience with Cyclone Idai might inform regional efforts to strengthen institutional capacities, align national policies with global frameworks and enhance community-level resilience to disasters.

This paper was structured into five sections. Following this introduction, Section Two outlined the research methodology, detailing the data sources, analytical frameworks and approach used in the study. Section Three presented the results and discussion, highlighting critical issues identified in Zimbabwe's disaster management framework. Section Four offered conclusions and actionable policy recommendations, while Section Five provided the references used throughout the paper, formatted in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in critical policy analysis. The aim was to investigate the gaps within Zimbabwe's disaster management framework as revealed by the country's response to Cyclone Idai. Qualitative research was appropriate for exploring complex institutional and governance issues where subjective interpretation, contextual understanding and critical inquiry were central. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using document analysis and expert perspectives, the study examined how institutional frameworks, policy documents and stakeholder actions aligned or failed to align with disaster management best practices before, during and after the cyclone.

Research Design and Approach

A case study approach was employed, focusing on Zimbabwe's experience during Cyclone Idai in 2019. Case studies are particularly suited for in-depth exploration of bounded systems such as national disaster response mechanisms in the face of specific events. (Yin, 2018). Cyclone Idai, as a high-impact climate-related disaster, offered a meaningful case through which to critically examine Zimbabwe's institutional capacity, legal frameworks and operational readiness.

The research was guided by two theoretical frameworks: the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model and the Institutional Capacity Framework. These frameworks informed the selection and analysis of documents, highlighting both structural vulnerabilities and the role of governance in shaping disaster outcomes. The PAR model emphasised the intersection of hazard exposure and social vulnerability, while the Institutional Capacity Framework focused on policy, coordination and administrative readiness. (Wisner et al., 2004; Comfort, 2005).

Data Sources

The study relied primarily on secondary data sources, including official government policy documents, disaster management legislation (notably the Civil Protection Act of 1989), international disaster risk reduction frameworks (for example, the Sendai Framework) and post-disaster assessment reports from agencies such as UNDP, UNOCHA and ACAPS. Additional sources included academic journal articles, news archives and grey literature related to Cyclone Idai and disaster risk governance in Zimbabwe.

Where available, key informant interviews and published commentary by disaster management officials, NGO personnel and community leaders were reviewed to provide context and supplement documentary evidence. These sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility and publication date (preferably 2018–2023). The inclusion of diverse materials was aimed at triangulating findings and ensuring a balanced assessment of both institutional and community-level perspectives.

Data Collection and Selection Criteria

Documents were identified through keyword searches using databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus and institutional websites (for example, UNDRR, Zimbabwe Civil Protection Unit and IFRC). Search terms included: Cyclone Idai Zimbabwe, disaster management policy, Civil Protection Act Zimbabwe, institutional response to disasters and disaster governance in Southern Africa. Selection criteria included relevance to the research objectives, credibility of the source, recency (post-2015) and analytical depth. All documents were reviewed for content related to the four phases of disaster management: preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery. Emphasis was placed on identifying recurring themes, policy gaps, coordination challenges and any alignment—or lack thereof—with international disaster risk reduction standards.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis, which involved identifying, coding and organising patterns or themes within qualitative data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were generated inductively from the data and deductively based on the theoretical frameworks. The analysis focused on uncovering evidence of institutional strengths, weaknesses, policy inconsistencies and operational challenges experienced during Cyclone Idai. Key themes included: (1) legal and policy framework adequacy, (2) institutional coordination, (3) early warning and preparedness, (4) stakeholder involvement and (5) post-disaster recovery planning. These themes were used to structure the Results and Discussion section of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study primarily utilised publicly available documents and did not involve original fieldwork or primary data collection from human subjects, formal ethical clearance was not required. However, ethical principles were observed in accurately representing sources, avoiding misinterpretation of data and maintaining academic integrity in all reporting and referencing practices.

Results and Discussion

The article presented its findings under the following headings: Early Warning and Preparedness Failures, Institutional and Coordination Weaknesses, Resource Constraints and Infrastructure Gaps, Policy and Legislative Gaps, Community Resilience and Coping Mechanisms Gaps and Post-Disaster Recovery Challenges.

Early Warning and Preparedness Failures

The research found out that the catastrophic impact of Cyclone Idai on communities in Chimanimani and Chipinge was not merely the result of a natural hazard, but the outcome of deeper, systemic vulnerabilities embedded in Zimbabwe's disaster management system. This aligned with the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model, which views disasters as the intersection of natural hazards and social, political and institutional pressures. (Wisner et al., 2004). In this context, the hazard (Cyclone Idai) acted upon pre-existing vulnerabilities—weak early warning systems, low disaster awareness and poor institutional coordination—resulting in a large-scale disaster. The Institutional Capacity Framework further helped to explain how limited technical coordination, poor communication infrastructure and outdated policies constrained the state's ability to anticipate and mitigate the cyclone's effects. (Comfort, 2005).

Warnings Were Issued Late or Not at All in Remote Areas

Although forecasts were available days before the cyclone, they often failed to reach at-risk communities in time. In remote districts such as Chimanimani, warnings came through informal channels like social media, or not at all. As one survivor put it, "We had heard about the cyclone, but people just thought it was the same cyclones that were previously experienced. Had it been that warnings were given earlier specifying the seriousness of the cyclone and its impacts, people would have vacated their houses when it was still safe to do so" (Munsaka et al., 2020). This reflected both infrastructural limitations and a breakdown in communication flow from national to community level, as highlighted in the PAR Model's concept of "dynamic pressures."

Limited Community Education on Disaster Risks

The absence of sustained community-based disaster education meant that even when warnings were received, they were often misunderstood or ignored. Munsaka et al. (2021) reported that only 36.7% of those who received warnings took protective action. Without prior knowledge of cyclone risks or response options, communities could not translate meteorological alerts into life-saving action. As Global Issues (2019) noted, warnings were often dismissed as alarmist due to a lack of previous experience and education. According to the Institutional Capacity Framework, this revealed a failure in capacity building and long-term risk communication.

Lack of Integration Between Meteorological Services and Civil Protection Units

The Meteorological Services Department and the Department of Civil Protection failed to operate as a cohesive unit in the face of an escalating threat. Coordination protocols were either weak or missing. The Civil Protection Act (1989), Zimbabwe's primary disaster legislation, lacked specific provisions for integrating technical forecasts into response planning. (Chatiza, 2019). The Auditor-General noted that "National Civil Protection did not take advantage of traditional ways to disseminate warnings in time through chiefs, councillors, [and] headmen" (Audit Office of Zimbabwe, 2019). This breakdown in institutional coordination supported Comfort's (2005) assertion that organisational fragmentation significantly reduced emergency response capacity.

Institutional and Coordination Weaknesses

The research found out that the institutional architecture underpinning Zimbabwe's disaster management system significantly weakened the effectiveness of the response to Cyclone Idai. These structural weaknesses were evident in how decision-making was centralised, communication between governance levels was fragmented and coordination among humanitarian actors was poorly managed. Viewed through the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model (Wisner et al., 2004), these issues represented "dynamic pressures" and "unsafe conditions" that transformed a natural hazard into a human disaster. Likewise, the Institutional Capacity Framework (Comfort, 2005) revealed that disaster response systems lacked the coherence, leadership and integration needed to operate effectively during an emergency. The three critical institutional failings observed were: over-centralisation of disaster response, poor vertical communication and duplication of efforts among humanitarian actors.

Over-centralisation of Disaster Response

A key finding was that disaster response efforts were heavily centralised, limiting the ability of local authorities to make timely decisions and coordinate responses effectively. Local governments and district civil protection units were largely sidelined during the immediate aftermath of the cyclone. As Oxfam (2019) observed, "local authorities ... were not leading the response and their sub-structures were also relatively invisible as national government led the response". This centralised model resulted in delays in resource mobilisation and created bottlenecks in emergency action, especially in remote areas like Chimanimani and Chipinge. In terms of the PAR Model, such structural arrangements acted as dynamic pressures that reduced local resilience. The Institutional Capacity Framework also highlighted how over-centralisation without adequate decentralised support led to weak operational capacity at the point of impact.

Poor Communication Between National and Local Authorities

Another critical institutional weakness was the breakdown in communication between national-level disaster management agencies and sub-national structures. Interviews with local officials revealed a lack of clarity regarding operational roles and delayed communication of critical information. One district official noted, "At the district level, we were aware of the cyclone, but we either did not get guidance in time, or the instructions were unclear. We ended up coordinating ourselves until the national teams arrived" (Munsaka et al., 2021). These communication breakdowns hindered early mobilisation of response activities and led to misalignment between local needs and national interventions. Within the Institutional Capacity Framework, this reflects a failure in governance integration and information flow — both essential for managing rapid-onset disasters effectively. Similarly, the PAR Model would characterise this as an unsafe condition resulting from poor institutional linkages.

Duplicated Efforts Among Humanitarian Actors Due to Lack of Coordination

The absence of a coherent coordination mechanism among humanitarian agencies led to the duplication of relief efforts, inefficient use of resources and uneven service delivery. In some cases, multiple NGOs responded to the same communities with similar forms of aid, while others were left unattended. A post-disaster review by the Global Partnership for Education (2021) highlighted this issue: "One action point that was very pertinent was the realisation that without being coordinated, we would end up doing similar things... different development

partners came to the same school with intentions to construct classrooms, thereby duplicating each other's efforts." This lack of coordination not only delayed recovery but also fostered confusion among affected populations. The Institutional Capacity Framework stresses the need for integrated coordination systems to ensure synergy among actors. The PAR Model interprets this as an institutional vulnerability that amplifies disaster impact by weakening organisational effectiveness.

Resource Constraints and Infrastructure Gaps

The research found that major resource constraints and severe infrastructure damage significantly hampered the response to Cyclone Idai in eastern Zimbabwe, particularly in the districts of Chimanimani and Chipinge. These constraints compromised emergency logistics, delayed aid delivery and exacerbated the crisis when the hazard struck. From the perspective of the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model, the destroyed infrastructure and depleted resources represent "unsafe conditions" and "dynamic pressures" that elevated vulnerability (Wisner et al., 2004). Simultaneously, the Institutional Capacity Framework highlights how limitations in technical infrastructure, supply chains and financial capacity reduced the state's ability to respond rapidly and effectively (Comfort, 2005).

Inadequate emergency supplies and response logistics

One of the first issues identified was the shortage of emergency supplies—food, shelter materials, equipment—and logistical capacity to deliver them. According to a post-disaster assessment, access to some 95 % of the road network in the affected areas had been damaged or rendered unusable, severely restricting mobility and distribution of relief goods (UNDP, 2019). Local officials remarked on the difficulty of moving supplies: "Our road was badly affected... the bridge at Nedziwa was also affected and it needed to be reconstructed since the river was now impassable" (Female respondent, Nedziwa, Chimanimani; Build-Back-Better study, 2021). These constraints delayed the arrival of critical life-saving aid and contributed to prolonged exposure of affected populations. In terms of the PAR model, the depleted logistical capacity is a dynamic pressure converting hazard into disaster; the Institutional Capacity Framework reveals that inadequate resources and systems undermined response.

Poor road access delayed aid delivery

The second sub-heading reflects a deeper infrastructure breakdown: damaged and inaccessible roads and bridges created severe bottlenecks for relief operations. The World Bank reported that an estimated direct damage of USD 622 million had been incurred in Zimbabwe from Cyclone Idai, with transport infrastructure among the most heavily affected sectors (World Bank, 2019). In Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, more than 90 % of road networks were reported as damaged, with some 584 km of roads impacted by landslides (Sibanda, 2019). These disruptions meant that emergency responders were delayed, supplies could not reach remote wards and evacuation became more dangerous. Under the Institutional Capacity Framework, this shows weak infrastructure and connectivity undermining operational capacity; under the PAR model, it is an unsafe condition that enabled higher impact.

Damaged infrastructure (roads, bridges) exacerbated the crisis

Finally, the research found that the widespread destruction of physical infrastructure—roads, bridges, water supply systems, power poles—exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and impeded recovery. For example, the Zimbabwe Rapid Impact and Needs Assessment (RINA) report noted damage to 20,354 m of bridges and extensive destruction of housing stock in the affected districts (GFDRR, 2019). A study on “build-back-better” emphasised: “Cyclone Idai impacted infrastructure that included roads, bridges ... people’s movement was restricted, since they could not access other areas across rivers due to damaged bridges” (Build-Back-Better Study, 2021).

The loss of this infrastructure not only delayed aid but also disrupted livelihoods, education, health access and long-term recovery. According to the Institutional Capacity Framework, resilience is contingent on functional infrastructure; these failures therefore weakened Zimbabwe’s disaster response system. From the PAR model perspective, such infrastructure damage is a core unsafe condition that magnifies hazard effects.

Policy and Legislative Gaps

The research found that a key contributor to the magnitude of the impact of Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe was the misalignment between contemporary disaster risk realities and the nation’s policy and legal frameworks. Using the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model, this misalignment can be understood as a structural “root cause” of vulnerability—where institutional arrangements amplify the hazard’s impact (Wisner et al., 2004). From the lens of the Institutional Capacity Framework, the legislative regime lacked the clarity, scope and adaptability required to guide effective disaster mitigation and recovery (Comfort, 2005). In Zimbabwe, three specific policy gaps were evident: the outdated Civil Protection Act (1989) and its climate-blindness; unclear stakeholder roles; and the absence, at the time, of a formal national disaster risk reduction strategy.

The Civil Protection Act (1989) Is Outdated and Lacks Provisions for Climate-Related Disasters

A foundational problem is that the Civil Protection Act (1989) still forms the core legal instrument for disaster management in Zimbabwe, yet it was enacted at a time when climate-related hazards such as cyclones were not at the forefront of policy thinking. As Mavhura (2016) argues, the Act “falls short of building national and community resilience to disasters” due to its focus on reactive, rather than proactive, measures. The Act emphasises emergency response over risk reduction and makes minimal mention of climate change or hydrometeorological hazards (Mavhura, 2016). Indeed, one policy study concluded: “The 1989 Civil Protection Act is not in sync with either the elements of the Hyogo Framework or the Sendai Framework” (Bongo, 2021). This gap means that the legal architecture does not compel institutions to adopt risk-reduction, early warning or resilience-building strategies. Within the PAR model, this represents a “dynamic pressure” – the law itself creates a constraining condition that increases community vulnerability.

Lack of Clarity on the Roles of Different Stakeholders

The second policy gap lies in the ambiguous division of roles and responsibilities among national and sub-national actors, plus non-governmental stakeholders. The Civil Protection Act sets up a hierarchical structure of national, provincial and district civil protection committees, but does not clearly define resources, mandates or operational autonomy at lower levels (Bongo, 2021). One interviewee noted: “We have very good disaster risk management plans, but they have been shelved. We do not have the financial and human resources to implement our plans...” (Mavhura et al., 2021). This confusion of roles weakens institutional capacity: local authorities often wait for national directives while communities languish without support. From the Institutional Capacity Framework viewpoint, this lack of clarity undermines coordination, accountability and timely action. The PAR model interprets such unclear institutional roles as part of the “unsafe conditions” which magnify damage when a hazard eventuates.

Absence of a Formal National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy at the Time

Thirdly, at the time of Cyclone Idai, Zimbabwe lacked a formally approved, comprehensive national disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategy aligned with the global Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Although draft documents such as the Disaster Risk Management Bill (2011) and related policies exist, they have not been fully adopted or operationalised (ActionAid Zimbabwe, 2022). As one advocacy brief argued: “Zimbabwe has been very slow to revise and enact a robust disaster risk reduction policy framework but still clings to the old Civil Protection Act of 1989” (ActionAid Zimbabwe, 2022). Without such a strategy, risk reduction remains peripheral rather than central to national development. The Institutional Capacity Framework suggests that without strategic direction and institutional frameworks, resilience-building efforts are ad hoc and fragmented. Through the PAR lens, the absence of a formal strategy becomes part of the root causes of vulnerability— communities are left exposed because the system lacks a proactive blueprint.

Community Resilience and Coping Mechanisms Gaps

The research found that, despite institutional and infrastructural failures, community-level resilience played a critical role in immediate disaster response during Cyclone Idai. In areas where government presence was delayed or limited, communities turned to informal support systems, traditional leadership and indigenous knowledge to cope with the aftermath of the cyclone. These grassroots responses underscore the importance of bottom-up approaches to disaster risk reduction. However, the absence of mechanisms to incorporate these local strategies into formal disaster frameworks reflects a missed opportunity for institutional learning. From the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model perspective, community coping strategies represent adaptive responses within an environment marked by unsafe conditions and root causes (Wisner et al., 2004). The Institutional Capacity Framework similarly highlights the value of integrating horizontal networks of resilience into formal structures to enhance adaptive capacity (Comfort, 2005).

Informal Support Networks Played a Crucial Role

Immediately following the disaster, informal support networks were often the first and, in some cases, the only source of assistance for affected families. These included extended family structures, neighbour-to-neighbour aid and religious or community-based organisations. In the

absence of timely institutional intervention, many survivors relied on relatives for shelter and food, while churches and burial societies mobilised collective resources for recovery. A respondent from Chimanimani noted: "Before aid came, we helped each other. People shared food and those whose homes were not destroyed took in others" (Build-Back-Better Study, 2021). These grassroots coping mechanisms were essential in stabilising communities during the first critical days. According to the Institutional Capacity Framework, these actions form part of social capital, which can significantly enhance resilience if acknowledged and supported by formal systems.

Traditional Leaders and Local Knowledge Helped Some Communities Prepare

The research also found that in some areas, traditional leaders and elders used indigenous knowledge and early signs of environmental changes to prepare their communities. For example, unusual weather patterns and shifts in animal behaviour were interpreted as signs of impending danger, prompting some communities to move to higher ground or secure important possessions. Traditional leaders were also instrumental in mobilising people for communal clean-up, rebuilding and support efforts. Mavhura et al. (2021) document how local leaders often acted as intermediaries between aid organisations and their communities. These findings support arguments that indigenous knowledge systems are an underutilised resource in disaster preparedness. Within the PAR Model, local knowledge offers community-level solutions to unsafe conditions. Yet, without formal recognition, these mechanisms remain marginal and under-leveraged.

Need to Institutionalise Local Strategies in Formal Disaster Frameworks

Despite their demonstrated importance, community-based strategies remain largely excluded from Zimbabwe's formal disaster risk governance. There is limited institutional guidance on how to integrate local knowledge, traditional leadership and informal support networks into official preparedness and response systems. This gap reflects a centralised, top-down approach to disaster management, which undermines locally driven resilience. According to ActionAid Zimbabwe (2022), "There is a need to institutionalise community knowledge systems and practices into national disaster planning to make it more responsive and inclusive." The Institutional Capacity Framework calls for interlinkages between formal and informal systems to strengthen adaptive response, while the PAR Model sees the failure to institutionalise local strategies as a continued reproduction of unsafe conditions. Incorporating these grassroots capacities can help build a more inclusive and sustainable disaster management system.

Post-Disaster Recovery Challenges

The research found that Zimbabwe's post-disaster recovery following Cyclone Idai was slow, fragmented and heavily dependent on external humanitarian support. While emergency interventions addressed some immediate needs, long-term recovery processes—including the restoration of livelihoods, housing, education and health services—faced significant challenges due to weak institutional coordination, inadequate funding and a lack of long-term planning. Within the lens of the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model, these shortcomings in recovery can be viewed as part of the "root causes" and "dynamic pressures" that sustain vulnerability over time (Wisner et al., 2004). Similarly, the Institutional Capacity Framework highlights that effective recovery requires a coordinated, well-resourced and inclusive institutional response, which was largely absent.

Delayed Reconstruction of Infrastructure

One of the key findings was that reconstruction of infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, schools and clinics, was delayed for months or years in some areas, leaving many communities in a prolonged state of vulnerability. According to the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR, 2019), the total recovery needs in Zimbabwe after Cyclone Idai were estimated at over USD 767 million, with sectors like housing and transport requiring the largest investments. However, limited domestic financing, bureaucracy and inconsistent donor support hindered progress. A local official interviewed during the study observed: "We are still waiting for some of the roads to be repaired. Children are crossing rivers with makeshift logs to get to school. It feels like the disaster never ended." This reflects how post-disaster periods, when poorly managed, become protracted humanitarian crises.

Livelihood Insecurity and Social Protection Gaps

Another critical issue was the limited focus on livelihood recovery and psychosocial support. While some short-term food aid and shelter were provided by NGOs and UN agencies, few efforts focused on rebuilding sustainable sources of income, particularly for women and small-scale farmers. The Build-Back-Better Study (2021) notes that only a minority of affected households received comprehensive livelihood recovery assistance. The lack of coordinated social protection mechanisms further deepened poverty and inequality. From the perspective of the Institutional Capacity Framework, this indicates weak policy design and inadequate social systems to support long-term resilience.

Exclusion of Community Voices in Recovery Planning

Moreover, the recovery process lacked meaningful community participation and failed to integrate lessons learned into future preparedness. This top-down approach meant that communities had little influence over reconstruction priorities. ActionAid Zimbabwe (2022) stresses the importance of participatory recovery that leverages local knowledge and empowers communities to lead rebuilding efforts. Without such integration, recovery not only becomes inefficient but also reproduces the same vulnerabilities that existed before the disaster. Within the PAR Model, this exclusion is part of the broader structural weaknesses that sustain unsafe conditions over time.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study critically analysed Zimbabwe's disaster management policy through the lens of Cyclone Idai, which exposed systemic weaknesses in the country's capacity to prevent, respond to and recover from major disasters. The research was driven by the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related hazards, which have highlighted the importance of comprehensive and adaptive disaster governance frameworks. Anchored in the Pressure and Release (PAR) Model and the Institutional Capacity Framework, the study interrogated structural vulnerabilities, institutional inefficiencies and the dynamics that shaped the nation's disaster response during and after Cyclone Idai. The central problem identified was the outdated legislative and institutional infrastructure, particularly the continued reliance on the Civil Protection Act of 1989, which is ill-suited to address modern disaster risks and climate-induced events.

Using a qualitative research design grounded in policy analysis, data were collected from government documents, NGO reports and interviews with disaster management stakeholders in affected areas. The findings revealed critical gaps in early warning systems, institutional coordination, emergency logistics and community engagement. While informal networks and traditional leaders played a vital role in response and coping, their contributions remain under-recognised in formal disaster governance structures. Notably, the research also revealed that post-disaster recovery efforts were fragmented, slow and largely top-down, lacking both sustainability and community participation. These failures have long-term implications for resilience, equity and vulnerability reduction in disaster-prone regions like Chimanimani and Chipinge.

Considering these findings, the study recommends a full overhaul of Zimbabwe's disaster management framework, starting with the enactment of the proposed Disaster Risk Management and Civil Protection Bill to replace the outdated 1989 Act. Greater decentralisation of disaster planning, improved coordination mechanisms, investment in resilient infrastructure and the formal integration of community-based strategies into national policies are also essential. Future research should investigate how community-led disaster risk reduction models can be scaled up within formal institutions and explore comparative regional approaches to disaster recovery and resilience-building. Strengthening disaster governance in Zimbabwe is not only urgent—it is fundamental to safeguarding human life, sustainable development and climate adaptation.

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