

TOWARDS A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH IN DISASTER RESPONSE: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE EL NIÑO-INDUCED DROUGHT IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The drought in Zimbabwe, caused by El Niño in 2015-2016, exposed glaring vulnerabilities within the disaster response machinery of the state, establishing a burning requirement for fast-tracking a human rights-based approach to disaster relief and recovery. This literature review examines how far human rights principles of non-discrimination, participation, and accountability were employed for humanitarian action related to this drought, which directly or indirectly affected over four million Zimbabweans, with vulnerable groups like smallholder farmers, women, and children suffering the most. It stresses that natural calamities magnify existing socioeconomic inequalities, making it paramount for a rights-based approach to ensure the enjoyment of fundamental rights to food, water, health, and housing in times of crisis, elevating the state's duty to protect, respect, and fulfil those rights irrespective of social standing. The study adopts a desk review complemented by surveys of

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disaster-affected communities and humanitarian workers to investigate the policy framework, institutional practices, and accountability mechanisms, revealing pervasive problems of lack of transparency in aid distribution, poor and unsafe complaint systems, limited independent monitoring, and political interferences fuelling corruption and inequitable access to relief resources. These systemic gaps erode the trust of affected populations, aggravating food insecurity and entrenching further impunity and therefore affect disaster management and violate the rights of affected populations. By cross-analyzing regional and global best cases from countries such as Zambia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Botswana, this literature encourages the use of digital complaint platforms, independent oversight bodies for capacity-building in climate-smart agriculture, and stringent anti-corruption frameworks in enhancing transparency, participation, and equity in the promotion of humanitarian aid. This overview strongly advocates an action plan that takes into consideration transparent beneficiary targeting criteria, culturally appropriate and confidential grievance mechanisms, strengthened independent monitoring with civil society engagement, as well as sustained capacity building of local actors in embedding human rights into disaster response systems. The conversation makes reference to limitations in the literature and the dynamic characteristics of disaster contexts but firmly suggests that the political will and institutional reform inspires the overcoming of these deep-seated challenges. Ultimately, this review recommends adopting a comprehensive human rights approach to redeem Zimbabwe's disaster relief from its current exclusionary, inequitable, and non-accountable ways by implementing policy and practice ideas that favour transparency, accountability, and empowerment to shield human rights against the backdrop of rising climate-induced disasters.

Key Words: *Disaster Risk Reduction, accountability, participation*

INTRODUCTION

The widespread devastation of the drought in Zimbabwe, caused by the El Niño weather phenomenon, laid bare the country's weaknesses in responding to disasters. The massive toll this drought has taken on human wellbeing and infrastructure has further propelled the recognition of the need for a human-rights-based discourse in disaster response. There exists, however, a glaring gap between policy and ground implementation. Natural disasters reach out mostly to the vulnerable and heighten existing socioeconomic disparities. In disaster scenarios, a human-rights approach is indispensable since it will protect and fulfil fundamental rights, including food, water, health, and housing rights. This research evaluates how far human rights approaches have been integrated into disaster response and recovery, using as a case study the 2015-2016 El Niño drought in Zimbabwe.

El Niño is a phenomenon marked by the periodic warming of the Pacific waters, often causing major disruptions to global weather patterns and yielding conditions favourable for droughts, floods, and other extremes. Zimbabwe experienced one of the most severe droughts in decades in 2015-2016, as the El Niño event impacted over 4 million people across the country, leaving many without adequate access to food, clean water, and basic services (OCHA, 2016). The crisis instanced the aforementioned plight of marginalized populations such as smallholder farmers, women, and children whose actual risks of malnutrition, disease, and displacement are further increased. The application of a human rights lens in disaster response and recovery is key to putting the needs and rights of the affected communities as the bedrock of the relief and recovery approach. This places emphasis on the state's obligation to protect, respect, and fulfil the human rights of all people regardless of their socioeconomic status in society. It is such human rights principles as non-discrimination, participation, and accountability that can render disaster management more inclusive,

fair, and just in addressing the specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the extent to which a human rights approach was integrated into the humanitarian response to the 2015-2016 El Niño drought in Zimbabwe. The research will assess the policies, programs, and stakeholders' involvement undertaken by the Zimbabwe government, international organizations, and civil society in dealing with the crisis from a human rights perspective. The findings will add to the emerging scholarship on the application of human rights frameworks in disaster settings and offer recommendations for strengthening the integration of these principles in disaster response and recovery efforts.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Natural disasters have begun to occur with greater frequency and intensity due to climate change, affecting the realization of human rights and sustainable development even further. Research in this area has made several connections among climate change, hazard, and human rights abuses (IPCC, 2021; OHCHR, 2021). Extreme weather conditions, such as unusual heatwaves, erratic precipitation, floods, and storms, can severely interfere with the realization of fundamental rights, including the rights to life, health, food security, water, and adequate housing (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; OHCHR, 2018).

A great share of research signifies that disasters disproportionately affect already-disadvantaged persons, including the poor, marginalized communities, and populations living in hazard-prone regions, which further worsen already-existing socioeconomic inequalities (Ensor & Berger, 2009; IPCC, 2022). For instance, during drought periods, women and children are often exposed to greater risks of malnutrition, disease, and displacement as a result of exclusion from accessing crucial resources and decision-making processes

(Eastin, 2018; Godfrey *et al.*, 2019). This realization highlights the human rights considerations that the United Nations and other bodies have long emphasized, underlining even further the need for ensuring that all DRR, preparedness, and response efforts include implementations of human rights principles (UNISDR, 2015; UNFCCC, 2019). This means respecting the participation right by communities implicated, non-discrimination, and accountability in policy formulation and implementation (OHCHR, 2018; UNDRR, 2020). If disaster response and recovery followed an approach based on human rights principles, such actions could ensure a broader perspective, assure equal rights, and consider the diversity of needs and capacities of various groups (Dempsey, 2016; UNDRR, 2021). This particular framework further highlights the state's obligations regarding the maintenance of respect, protection, and fulfilment of human rights despite natural catastrophes (Narula, 2021; Tanner & Allouche, 2011).

El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is a recurring climatic pattern with a large global reach affecting the weather patterns and disaster risk of everyone living on earth (Trenberth, 1997; Cai *et al.*, 2018). An El Niño event can cause periods of droughts, floods, and other extreme weather conditions across such regions as Southern Africa when sea surfaces in the tropical Pacific Ocean become warmer (Reason *et al.*, 2000; Hoell *et al.*, 2017). It is a warm shift of sea-surface temperatures in the Pacific Ocean tropics affecting global atmospheric circulation and precipitation patterns (Timmermann *et al.*, 2018). The 2015-2016 episode of the El Niño was among the most enduring ever, resulting in substantial drought across many countries, including Zimbabwe (Archer *et al.*, 2017; Dai & Zhao, 2017). There was a higher incidence of food insecurity, water scarcity, and distribution of diseases within the affected area during the El Niño events (Anyamba *et al.*, 2019; Selvaraj *et al.*, 2021). Such drought led to crop failures, livestock losses, and water shortages; while all this contributed in exacerbating the already

existing economic and food security challenges in Zimbabwe (Manatsa *et al.*, 2016).

Present observations and analyses depicted that the increasing incidence, intensity, and duration of ENSO events due to changes in the global climate tend exponentially to increase the associated risks projected to be characterized through extreme weather and related disasters (Cai *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Until ENSO is fully understood, anticipating its impacts under the present-day changing global climate will be of paramount importance in context to disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development initiatives (Sarachik & Cane, 2010; Meehl *et al.*, 2021).

Zimbabwe, a landlocked nation in Southern Africa, is peculiarly sensitive to climate change and natural disasters. The 2015-2016 drought, which was driven by the El Niño, had far-reaching consequences, impacting over 4 million people who lacked food, clean water, and services (OCHA, 2016). This disaster highlighted the susceptibility of some of the most disadvantaged populations such as smallholder farmers, women, and children, very often faced with risk of malnutrition, disease, and displacement (Beine & Parsons, 2015).

Surviving with a rights-based paradigm is key towards upholding human rights during disasters and also enhances the nurturing of justice and empowerment of affected communities (OHCHR, 2018). The framers strongly emphasize that it is incumbent upon the state to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights in this respect, always keeping the principles of non-discrimination, participation, and accountability high. Thus, by imbuing the management of disasters with the core human rights values, not only will disaster relief and recovery further promote equity, but they will also be made more inclusive and considerate of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of various groups (Aysan & Davis, 1992).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study intends to determine how service providers can best adopt a human rights approach into disaster relief practices to deal with equitable resource allocations, transparency, and protection of people's rights during times of crisis. Such a need is rooted in the numerous reports of distribution of food aid in a manner that is unfair and inequitable by disaster settings all over the world (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Studies in Zimbabwe and within other countries in Africa have shown that aid in disaster relief is oftentimes allocated along political lines, which run contrary to the laws and human rights obligations of the respective countries (Mafirakureva & Nyamwanza, 2024; ACAPS, 2024). Furthermore, true to the demon of corruption and nepotism, the distribution of relief aid is often marred, impacting disproportionately upon the most vulnerable of communities (Transparency International, 2024; UNDP, 2024). This gap entails some major inconsistencies between the ideals of equitable disaster relief, plus the corresponding realities, adding urgency to the need for a human rights-based approach to counter these challenges. The aim of this study is to provide insightful ways forward for service providers, policymakers, and stakeholders to further develop disaster relief practices, by researching the experiences of disaster-impacted communities, analyzing existing accountability frameworks, and outlining best practice. In the long run, this would bring about transparency and accountability and protection of people's rights during a time of crises, which is in alignment with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNISDR 2024, OHCHR 2024).

OBJECTIVES

1. Examine the experiences of disaster-affected communities in Zimbabwe and other African countries regarding their access

- to food aid and resources, focusing on the fairness and equity of these distributions.
2. Evaluate the existing accountability mechanisms for reporting human rights violations in the distribution of food aid, identifying gaps and areas for improvement in ensuring transparency and justice.
 3. To Propose actionable recommendations for service providers and policymakers to effectively incorporate a human rights-based approach into disaster relief practices, ensuring enhanced accountability and protection of individuals' rights during crises

METHODOLOGY

This research used a desk review methodology in order to systematically investigate the experiences of disaster-affected communities, analyse accountability mechanisms, and capture best practices in terms of bringing a human rights-based approach to disaster relief practices. Some important methodological components of this are: A full review of grey literature, that is, reports from international organizations, civil society groups, and government agencies: this was instrumental in drawing field experiences and practical applications regarding human rights-based approaches in disaster relief, including real-world examples and case studies. It also analyzed policy documents, legal frameworks, and guidelines, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. This analysis brings together the normative and institutional landscape as far as it pertains to fact-finding approaches toward including human rights into disaster management, giving a clear picture of the legal and policy context surrounding disaster relief and flagging up key obligations and expectations for the actors involved. Important themes, challenges, and best practices were extracted from the literature, focusing on empirical evidence and case studies from disaster-affected communities. Such

thematic analysis allowed recurring patterns, challenges, and successful strategies for integrating human rights into disaster relief to be identified, providing very useful nuggets in themselves in support of the research objectives. In addition to the literature review, a target survey was conducted among two sets of respondents: disaster-affected communities and humanitarian relief workers. This survey was meant to gather firsthand perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of incorporating a human rights-based approach into disaster relief practice, specifically focusing on food aid distribution. The literature review, together with the findings of the survey, synthesized for a full understanding of the current status of human rights integration into disaster relief. With that understanding, it was possible to identify the most notable challenges and opportunities which fed into the formulation of recommendations concerning improvements to disaster relief practices.

So far as this research goes, a desk-review approach proved most effective in conducting a very thorough and systematic examination of existing knowledge, policies, and practices related to the human rights principles incorporation in disaster relief processes. Such methodologies build a solid foundation for a clear understanding of the field and its critical challenges to lend direction to actionable recommendations regarding disaster relief enhancement."

FINDINGS

1. EXPERIENCES OF DISASTER-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Lack of Transparency and Access to Information: Zimbabwe's fruit of aid during drought emergencies has been bereaved with opacity in matters that impede accountability and community trust. Over 5.5 million people were food insecure during the 2019 El Niño-induced drought, and reports indicated that aid was distributed without a public entry of the selection criteria. Communities in Binga and

Chiredzi accused their locals of favouritism and political bias, as far as determining who received such assistance was concerned (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2021; Zimbabwe Independent, 2018). This has led to a lack of access to program details pertinent to monitoring by communities, thus fuelling suspicion for potential 'kleptocracy'.

Food Insecurity in the Affected Areas: The long-term effect of food insecurity in Zimbabwe's rural regions tells the extent to which systemic vulnerabilities are aggravated by climate events. Collaborative, resilient schemes for strengthening local food systems now need to be developed (Matunhu *et al.*, 2022). Recent agricultural data from ZimVAC showed a decline of 70% in maize production in the 2023/2024 season and more than 9,000 deaths of livestock due to drought-induced water shortage. The World Food Programme (2025) estimated that 8 million Zimbabweans are in need of food support, among them 2.1 million from urban settlements-an alarming shift indicative of how climate shocks now affect traditionally less vulnerable sectors of populations.

Weak Complaint Mechanisms: Effective complaint systems are key to achieving justice and equity in humanitarian assistance. Many Zimbabwean food aid programs lack these accessible, secure, and functional complaint mechanisms for beneficiaries to lodge grievances. In Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (2019), these types of cases were recorded in which people raised an alarm and were cut out of future distributions of aid or outright adversity. Fear of retaliation and absence of anonymous feedback channels continue to discourage community members from challenging abusive practices (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2019), thereby reinforcing the impunity.

2. ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS FOR REPORTING VIOLATIONS

Insufficient Independent Monitoring and Oversight: These independent facilities are supposed to serve as a mechanism of checks to see that the aid

is being administered transparently and equitably. However, such mechanisms have been weak or non-existent in Zimbabwe. Those complaints have been reported by Transparency International Zimbabwe (2022) over unresolved allegations of corruption in aid distribution due to political interference and poor access to data. Reports of the FAO's Data in Emergencies Monitoring System stated that 38% of households had no adequate cereal supply, supposedly covered by aid, showcasing the existing systemic gaps in the M and E practices.

Limited Capacity and Resources: Both humanitarian and government agencies in Zimbabwe have very limited capacities. The Zimbabwe Red Cross Society (2022) reported that they had very low numbers of staff, poor technology, and inadequate funding, all of which limited their accomplishment of effective accountability processes. This has been compounded by popular donor fatigue and shifts of resource distribution in the globe-especially increasing aid to conflict zones like Ukraine, which will reduce the support available for Southern African responses. Strategic investments aimed at training personnel, adopting digital monitoring tools, and empowering community-led oversight initiatives are required to build outstanding sustainable accountability.

3. BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNT

REGIONAL INSIGHTS ON DISASTER RESPONSE AND HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

Learning from successful approaches by countries in the region could yield fruitful dividends with respect to strengthening Zimbabwe's disaster response framework in respect of El Niño-facilitated droughts.

Poor Mechanisms of Complaints: Zambia's Digital Reporting System: Zambia has made significant strides in enhancing complaint reporting mechanisms for food aid. Zambia has initiated the toll-free hotlines

and other online complaint systems coordinated by the Zambia Food Security and Nutrition Network, which improved the transparency and citizen engagement (Mukanu et al., 2023). Digital tools allowed the beneficiaries to report such irregularities anonymously during the crisis of 2021. Thus, the fear of retaliation reduced and trust in the assistance program increased. However, according to Haller and Merten (2009), it still does not keep local power dynamics from misusing the distribution of aids, thus indicating a need for community awareness and monitoring.

Independent Monitoring and Oversight: South African Human Rights Commission: South Africa's Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has played a great role in independent oversight of the food aid programs. Hence during the COVID-19 shutdowns, it was the SAHRC that investigated allegations of exclusion and corruption in the distribution of food parcels, issuing public reports and policy recommendations (Adeniyi & Durojaye, 2020). Importance of political will and institutional capacity in sustaining such oversight noted in citations by scholars like Jones (2017), while others argue that civil participation is important in making such institutions answerable to citizens (Sabi, 2018).

Capacity Building: Climate-Smart Agriculture Program of Tanzania: Tanzania has been a beneficiary of fruitful interaction with international partners in areas of capacity building under humanitarian response. The Building Capacity for Resilient Food Security in Tanzania initiative led by IITA and under USAID has developed the capacity of agricultural extension workers and humanitarian staff on climate-smart agriculture, complaint handling, and human rights principles (IITA, 2021). FAO reported that Tanzania has improved its food security data analysis for SDG monitoring and focused interventions (FAO 2022). "According to those such as Kansal

and Nyamsha (2020), precise irrigation and planning based on data create a foundation for long-term resilience," say the scholars.

Political Influence and Corruption: Botswana's Anti-Corruption Framework: Botswana adopted stringent anti-corruption measures which will also serve as a model for integrity in food aid distribution. The Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC) operates independently and has contributed to limited aid-related corruption through transparent procurement systems, community-based beneficiary selection, and routine audits (Mwamba, 2013; Jones, 2017). Botswana's success is attributed to strong institutions, political accountability, and public education (Good, 1994), although rural disparities and elite influence remain challenges.

GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES FOR DISASTER RESPONSE AND HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

Learning from successful approaches by countries around the globe could yield fruitful dividends with respect to strengthening Zimbabwe's disaster response framework in respect of El Niño-facilitated droughts.

Accessible and Transparent Complaint Mechanisms: The establishment of complaint and feedback mechanisms is an imperative practice in accountability and protecting the rights of populations affected by disasters. They enable beneficiaries to report mismanagement, abuse, or exclusion without fear of retaliation. World Vision International recommends complaint and response mechanisms such as toll-free lines, suggestion boxes, and community feedback sessions, to be integrated into food aid programs as mechanisms to enhance transparency (World Vision, 2015). In Bangladesh, communities accessed help desks that were further supplemented with mobile reporting tools, increasing the confidence of citizens during cyclone relief operations, as well as reduced diversion of resources (Kohler,

2021). According to CHS Alliance, there exist five critical essences of efficient complaints systems: visibility, confidentiality, cultural relevance, responsiveness, and improvement (CHS Alliance, 2023). It advocates the establishment of digital complaint platforms by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for social distance operations as observed in the COVID-19 pandemic (UNHCR, 2022). Such examples underline that the design of the program has to be ensured at the outset that the culturally sensitive and anonymous feedback channels are integrated.

Independent Monitoring and Oversight: An outside lens through which humanitarian actors can be held accountable for their activities and directly address inefficiencies is through oversight mechanisms. This is especially important in times of complex emergencies where corruption and exclusion are more likely. The World Food Programme uses third-party monitors and social audits to track food aid delivery in fragile contexts like Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (WFP, 2021). USAID's Office of Inspector General oversees the fraud prevention protocols and external audits for foreign assistance and provides protections for whistleblowers (USAID OIG, 2024). A regional case is that of the South African Human Rights Commission in making public investigations and recommendations to improve transparency in food parcel delivery (Adeniyi & Durojaye, 2020). However, an important role with evaluating governance gaps related to food programs is also performed by the Oversight Division of FAO, linking these with policies and reforms (FAO, 2023). Effective oversight combines independent verification with stakeholder engagement, public transparency, and timely reporting.

Capacity Building and Localization: Development of local capacities and systems is fundamental for building disaster response sustainability. Capacity building strengthens resilience, improves service delivery, and fosters ownership from affected communities. It emphasizes emergency preparedness, food systems governance, and

social protection programs tailored to emergency conditions as highlighted in the WFP's Country Capacity Strengthening Policy (WFP, 2022). Tanzania's overseas partnerships included training development through the Food Systems Resilience Program, involving the training of agricultural extension workers and aid staff in human rights principles, climate-resilient agriculture, and complaints handling (IITA, 2021). Initiatives funded by GLOBALG.A.P. to train farmers in responsible practices are also equipping communities with tools that can improve food safety and connect to responsible markets (GLOBALG.A.P., 2023). In Lesotho, UNDP developed community-led monitoring systems with the help of local organizations, thereby improving transparency and accountability in aid delivery. Such projects need context-aware training, participatory planning, and, eventually, long-term investments in human resources.

Anti-corruption Measures: Corruption is precisely the factor that weakens humanitarian responses and increases vulnerabilities among populations affected by disaster. Global standards concentrate their thorough preventive system plans and the legal safeguards that deter exploitation. Routine audits, disciplinary measures, and civic awareness about corruption in food aid systems are some of the activities by Botswana's Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (Mwamba, 2013). UNODC research describes the risks of bribery, embezzlement, and sextortion during food aid distribution and suggests solutions such as budget transparency, staff rotation, and whistleblower protection laws (UNODC, 2023). According to the community involvement in monitoring features of food-supply chains and the endorsement of statements for bringing governments to command to publish their aid data on open-access platforms, Transparency International has called on governments to publish their aid data in open-access formats (Camacho, 2022). Citizens can track the expenditures made by the government in real time through the Transparency Portal of Brazil, thus deter fraud and enhance confidence

levels in the country's food security interventions (Transparency International, 2022).

DISCUSSION

The critical analysis of accountability mechanisms in food aid distribution in Zimbabwe has revealed a complex interplay of challenges that inhibit the effective application of a human rights-based approach. Most relevant in these findings is a blatant lack of transparency in the distribution process, which will create barriers for beneficiaries and various stakeholders in monitoring the effectiveness of such aid. This obscurity is further obscured by ineffective complainant avenues with many affected people unaware of how to speak up when their rights have been violated, which in turn feeds the culture of impunity.

The absence of independent monitoring and oversight worsens the situation, giving grounds for accusations of corruption and favouritism, especially in times of crisis. Limited capacity and resource availability on the part of humanitarian organizations further stifle any real possibility of implementing workable accountability mechanisms, while political manipulation and corruption are known to divert aid from those that genuinely need it, further enhancing systemic inequities.

These findings raise several complications that need to be tackled in both practice and policy. Of immediate concern will be the integration of transparency mechanisms. In the absence of clarity for and accessibility by beneficiaries to monitoring systems on aid distribution, it is organizations that risk being seen to perpetuate inequality. Policies should rightfully prioritize such an aspect as a cornerstone of transparent aid distribution. Moreover, the lack of such easily accessible complaint mechanisms is an undue barrier. Policymakers

ought to focus on establishing simple and efficient avenues for beneficiaries to report violations, free from retaliation.

Accountability must, nonetheless, be enhanced through independent monitoring. Establishing independent overseeing agencies could ensure that aid distribution is fair and just. Accordingly, further research could assess how existing models in other jurisdictions can benefit the Zimbabwean context. Furthermore, randomized capacity-building programs are important, as the most basic resource in humanitarian organizations is the human resource. Staff training on human rights principles and accountability could enhance their ability to implement efficient mechanisms.

Political leverage remains one serious bottleneck for effective accountability work. The interplay between political dynamics and aid distribution ought to be studied further since understanding this interplay is critical to devising measures that work against corruption.

While this literature review gives an up-to-date overview of the state of affairs of accountability mechanisms regarding food aid distribution, several limitations must be pointed out. First, the preponderance of its focus on the literature in Zimbabwe may be not nearly as wide as taking stock of comparable studies in other contexts would permit. Second, broader comparisons might give more information. Further, the author's reliance on existing grey literature and reports may entail some degree of bias since these documents are able to reflect only limited organizational or stakeholder interest. A wider selection of sources, including academic studies, would surely strengthen the conclusions drawn from this review.

Further, this study's findings hinge on literature that may not aptly capture the dynamism involved in food aid distribution and accountability mechanisms, predominantly due to emerging trends

following the recent disastrous events or policy reforms. Frequent updates of this trend within the literature will matter in retaining current reality. Lastly, while many studies emphasize the quantification of accountability, they may gloss over qualitative variables, such as the beneficiary's experience. Future research could take a mixed-methods approach to contend with these observations.

ACTION PLAN

A multifaceted plan, which draws upon regional experience and lessons learned from global best practices to inform its utility on the ground, must take priority in implementing accountability mechanisms concerning food aid distribution. Proposed actions in light of the pertinent findings of the literature review will follow.

Set Up Processes with Transparency: The absence of transparency compromises the very principle of equity in humanitarian assistance. Aid programs should outline clearly documented criteria for beneficiary targeting-say, some in household vulnerability indices, nutritional indicators, or socioeconomic status-and disseminate this information through multiple means of communication, including community meetings, local radio, and printed materials in local languages. In Zimbabwe, though the Food Deficit Mitigation Strategy lays out procedures for registration and distribution, little community awareness exists regarding these standards. Moyo and Madziva (2021) also observe that when selection criteria are not visible at the local level, it fosters conditions for politicization and exclusion. In other parts of the world, new innovations like blockchain-based food supply systems have started to be tested to allow for tamper-proof records that could improve the traceability of aid flows (Tapscott and Tapscott, 2017). Such tools can offer practical solutions toward improving transparency and reducing opportunities for diversion or favouritism.

Accessible Mechanism for Complaints: Grievance mechanisms should assure anonymity, accessibility, and utmost confidentiality and enable affected populations to raise complaints in cases of violations, exclusions, or mistreatment. An effective grievance procedure is based on cultural values, is widely disseminated, and implements set policies for resolution or redress. The organization World Vision International (2015) recommends the establishment of community help desks, free hotlines, and suggestion boxes as the bedrock of all relief programs. Through mobile reporting platforms, trust among citizens in Zambia was increased and could show a decline in the distortion of assistance (Mukanu et al., 2023). Haller and Merten (2009) assert that community ownership of the reporting mechanisms strengthens their legitimacy and use. Kohler (2021) adds that these processes must guarantee feedback loops in which a complaint leads to corrective action, not just documentation.

Strengthening Independent Oversight: Independent Oversight gives credibility, provides objectivity, and ensures aid to intended beneficiaries. A solid oversight framework would constitute third-party audit, civil society monitoring, and social accountability tools. Since then, public investigations and reports by the South African Human Rights Commission were published on challenges of food aid distribution, which makes them set the pace for institutional involvement (Adeniyi and Durojaye, 2020). In conflict-affected areas throughout the world, the World Food Programme uses third-party monitors and real-time tracking to identify diversions and inefficiencies (WFP, 2021). Jones (2017) states that effective oversight takes political will, being financially independent, and having a legal mandate, while Sabi (2018) states that for there to be accountability, civil society must be involved as a stakeholder.

Capacity Building: The capacity-building of the individual as well as the institution constitutes the foundation of successful

implementations of any accountability mechanism. Training programs must focus on matters ranging from human rights standards, ethical distribution practices, data management, and complaint handling of humanitarian personnel and government officials. An example of this is Tanzania, where the Food Systems Resilience Program provided integrated site training for thousands of frontline workers, thereby prolonging the capacity of these workers to ensure service delivery and governance in rural communities (IITA, 2021). Conversely, piggybacking on these local NGOs in Zimbabwe, pilot projects have achieved electronic tracking of distribution vehicles and building the capacity of committees at the district level but with funding and standardization barriers still remaining (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2021). Kansal and Nyamsha (2020) posit that capacity building should be ongoing, context specific, and integrated into food security governance systemic reform.

CONCLUSION

The present scathing critique has exposed the dire need for accountability in the food aid distribution realm, particularly with regard to Zimbabwe. An obvious requirement is the need for a human-rights-based approach to guarantee equally transparent aid access amongst the most vulnerable populations. The results describe grave findings, such as a lack of transparency, ineffective complaint mechanisms, no independent monitoring, limited capacities and resources, and a grip of political corruption.

These barriers, in turn, impede disaster relief well into the present and undercut the very human rights of those for whom the assistance is a life and death question. They have pointed out some exemplars of best practices from Zambian and South African neighbours and highlighted innovative approaches, including accessible complaint hotlines and independent oversight bodies to serve as prototypes for Zimbabwe.

To address the identified challenges, humanitarian organizations and policymakers must now give priority to setting in place effective accountability systems. These must include transparency in distribution processes, independent monitoring, and capacity strengthening of actors at local level. By incorporating a human-rights-based approach, all stakeholders can contribute to a system of disaster relief that is fair and just for the stakeholders involved, recognizing the dignity and rights of all.

This paper recommends a sweeping paradigmatic overhaul of disaster relief in which human rights will constitute the mainstay of food aid distribution. It recommends that the implementation of these suggestions will foster accountability and transparency and build a culture in which communities will advocate for their rights towards greater resilience and dignity in times of crises.

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