Living with a Changing Climate: Youth Vulnerability, Resilience and Everyday Adaptation in Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examines how youths in Buhera District's Ward 16 experience, interpret and respond to climate-induced challenges within a semi-arid environment. This environment is characterised by recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall patterns and dependence on rain-fed agriculture. The study was guided by a critical application of Resilience Theory. The study adopted interpretivism research philosophy and a case study research design. In-depth interviews with ten youths aged 18-21 years and key informant interviews with two community leaders were conducted. The findings reveal that climate change is experienced not merely as an environmental phenomenon but as a lived social condition manifested through declining agricultural productivity, food insecurity, educational disruption, economic hardship and psychosocial stress. The study demonstrates that climate change is actively restructuring youth transitions to adulthood by narrowing educational pathways, undermining livelihood security and constraining future aspirations. By centering youth voices, the study contributes to climate change, youth studies and social work scholarship while highlighting the need for youth-centred, socially just and context-specific climate adaptation interventions in rural Zimbabwe and similar semi-arid settings.

Keywords: *rural youth, negotiated survivalism, context-specific climate adaptation, educational pathways*

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become one of the defining challenges of the 21st century. It continues to re-shape ecological systems, economies, livelihoods and social relations globally. Gilli *et al*. (2024) submit that, even if climate change is a global phenomenon, its effects are not experienced in the same way everywhere, or by the same groups of people. Developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, are often the ones more affected by climate related risks, regardless of contributing insignificantly to global greenhouse gas emissions (Okorie *et al*., 2024). This uneven vulnerability does not just happen by chance. It reflects wider social, economic and political gaps which end up influencing exposure, sensitivity and also adaptive capacity (IPCC, 2022). Thus, climate change is now viewed not only as an environmental matter, but also as a development issue tied to social justice and human well-being. In Sub-Saharan Africa, climate variability is associated with recurrent droughts, unpredictable rainfall pattens, higher temperatures, land degradation and growing water scarcity. These effect rural people significantly because many livelihoods depend on rain-fed agriculture (Trisos *et al*., 2022). Climate change disrupts farming and food security is lowered and household earnings. This strains livelihood arrangements and deepen multidimensional poverty (Niang *et al*., 2014). This is often worse in semi-arid zones where ecological fragility meets limited infrastructure, weak institutional support and fewer livelihood options. Thus, climate change acts as a threat multiplier in Zimbabwe because agriculture-dependent rural livelihoods are increasingly eroded by higher temperatures, droughts, shorter growing seasons and unstable rainfall (Mavhura and Manyena, 2021). Climate change intensifies rural poverty and food insecurity in Buhera, because people rely heavily on rain-fed cultivation with few alternative options.

Zimbabwe's climate research has also tended to downplay intra-household differences. Rural youth, for example, carry vulnerabilities shaped by age, gender and class. However, their situations are not studied although their exposure to climate risks is rising. When climate stress builds, education is disrupted, job chances are reduced, young people are pushed into precarious informal income sources and migration is accelerated (Mugambiwa and Tirivangasi, 2017; Sumberg *et al*., 2021). Therefore, climate change affects more than present-day comfort or hardship. It also steers the pathways young

people use to pursue social advancement, economic self-reliance and adulthood. Thus, focusing on youth experiences matters, because it may assist in shaping more inclusive and socially responsive adaptation policies. This study is built around youth experiences of climate change as a lived social reality and it explores how climate change shapes their education, livelihoods and psychosocial well-being and how they respond, without focusing only at household or agricultural levels.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A CRITICAL RESILIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Through critical the Resilience Theory lens, this study focuses on resilience as shaped by unequal access to resources and power, essential for making sense of rural youth lives in climate-vulnerable contexts where poverty, marginalisation and diminutive support interact. The theory started in ecological scholarship (Holling, 1973), where resilience was conceptulised as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances while still keeping its essential structures and functions. The concept evolved and became useful in disaster studies, development research and climate change work (Folke, 2006). In this context, resilience is about the capacity of people, households, communities and institutions to anticipate, absorb, adapt to and recover from climatic shocks, while continuing to protect well-being and functionality (Folke *et al*., 2010).

This theory provides three relevant aspects: interconnectedness, climate affects food, schooling, work opportunities and wellbeing and youth experiences also link to household life, local community patterns and broader political-economic processes. Then, adaptation, which appears through diversification, migration, social networks and indigenous knowledge (*ibid.*). Finally, diversity where multiple livelihood options act as a shock buffer (Adger, 2000). Still, there are critics who argue that resilience can hide structural vulnerability (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013) and in a way normalises suffering (Brown, 2021). In rural Zimbabwe, youth adaptive capacity is limited by uneven access to land, finance, technology, employment and decision-making power. Therefore, resilience does not really read as “individual grit”, it reflects how institutions are arranged and how social inequalities are organised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Climate change is one of the most significant drivers of vulnerability in rural communities across the Global South. It is not just about weather anymore. Scholars frame vulnerability as not merely a result of environmental hazards, but a socially produced condition, shaped by uneven power relations and institutional arrangements (Ribot, 2014; IPCC, 2022). Thus, climate change does not affect everyone in the same way. Depending on what people can actually access, individuals and communities experience the impacts differently. In this view, vulnerability mirrors the way environmental exposure meets social disadvantage. In Sub-Saharan Africa, rural populations are particularly exposed because many livelihoods are tied to climate sensitive sectors like rain-fed agriculture, livestock production and the utilisation of natural resources (Trisos *et al*., 2022). Rising temperatures, recurrent droughts, uneven rainfall and growing water scarcity have already disrupted livelihood systems. Resultantly, food security and the everyday well-being of households are threatened. It remains difficult to measure climate vulnerability through environmental indicators alone. Climatic shocks become way more damaging when they collide with poverty, fragile governance, weak infrastructure and a lack of adaptive resources (Niang *et al*., 2014). Thus, climate change works as a threat multiplier because it deepens socio-economic inequalities that were already there.

Zimbabwe mirrors these broader regional dynamics as shown by existing studies that have documented how recurring droughts, erratic rainfall and rising temperatures erode agricultural productivity and intensify food insecurity mainly in semi-arid districts (Mutasa, 2015; Mavhura, 2020; Mavhura and Manyena, 2021). Debates revolve around causes vulnerability. Arenas-Calle *et al*., (2024), insist that vulnerability is more fundamentally connected to unequal access to resources, institutional backing and socio-economic prospects (Ribot, 2014). From that angle, climate change cannot be treated as an island, separate from wider processes such as poverty, marginalisation and exclusion. These debates matter because they provide stronger basis for examining the experiences of rural youths, whose vulnerabilities may not match those of other community members.

Although lately scholarly attention on climate vulnerability exists, youths remain under-represented in climate change research. Much of existing work tends to focus on households as if they are homogenous. This hides generational differences in exposure, obligations, adaptive capacity and future opportunities. Researchers claim that youths should be viewed as a distinct group of climate vulnerability, because environmental shifts affect them in ways that are different from adults (Sumberg *et al*., 2021). Youth vulnerability seems to come from a mix of ecological exposure, alongside their socio-economic placement. In many rural communities, youths have limited access to productive assets such as land, capital, livestock and decent employment. Their daily lives depend on household livelihood strategies, climate shocks disrupt their education, health and what they expect for their own future. Thus, climate change is not only about current living conditions, it also shapes the future trajectories of the youths (Mugambiwa and Tirivangasi, 2017).

Resilience is one of the most influential ideas within climate change and development scholarship. The concept moved focus away from vulnerability only, to grasping how people, individuals and communities, respond to adversity (Folke, 2006). Studies show that rural populations rely on a range of adaptive approaches such as livelihood diversification, migration, informal economic work, social connections and the use of indigenous knowledge systems (Adger, 2000; Walker *et al*., 2004). Some scholars claim that resilience discourse may end up prioritising adaptation over transformation. Thus, it might encourage vulnerable individuals to adjust to harsh conditions instead of challenging the deeper structural drivers behind vulnerability (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013). Brown (2021) makes a similar point, arguing that resilience has turned into a normative ideal, a standard that quietly praises people for enduring hardship without genuinely asking why that hardship remains a problem. Thus, resilience could, unintentionally, promote older inequalities because it normalises adjusting to unfair establishments.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study is guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed and that it is best understood through the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). An interpretivist approach was suitable because the study aimed to make

sense of how youths from vulnerable households' experience, interpret and also respond to climate-induced challenges in their everyday lives. Climate change was treated not just as an environmental issue, but more like a lived social reality that is shaped by local contexts, relationships and lived encounters. A qualitative case study design was used. Case study research is especially useful for looking at contemporary matters in their real-life settings, where the lines between the phenomenon and the context are not easily separated (Yin, 2018). Climate change, together with youth vulnerability, count as that kind of phenomenon, because environmental change is closely interconnected with social, economic and institutional processes. The design supported a deep look at how climate variability informs daily routines, livelihood pathways, educational chances and the types of adaptive responses rural youths manage to develop.

The study was done in Ward 16 of Buhera District, in Manicaland Province Zimbabwe. Buhera is characterised by semi-arid climatic conditions, recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall patterns and periodic food shortages. Most households depend on rain-fed subsistence agriculture, livestock rearing and informal economic activities. Ward 16 was chosen because it has the climatic and socio-economic traits linked to vulnerability such as recurrent agricultural decline, declining food security and overall livelihood uncertainty.

The research focused on youths aged 18-21 years living in vulnerable households in Ward 16. That particular age band was selected because it is the critical shifting period, when individuals transition from late adolescence into early adulthood. Issues such as school options, livelihoods, household responsibilities and future aspirations are being worked out daily, while decisions are negotiated in real time. Anyone under 18 was excluded, mainly because additional ethical safeguards would apply for minors. For those above 21, they were also left out, mainly because livelihood pressures were typically different, such as independent household formation and formal employment searching. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who were information-rich- had direct experience of climate related difficulties (Patton, 2015). To participate, someone had to be a permanent resident of Ward 16, fall in the age range and come from households experiencing climate related disruptions to livelihoods. Ten youths participated, five males and five females.

Two key informants were interviewed: one village leader and one youth representative to gather broader perspectives on this topic.

Data were gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews. Semi-structured interviews were utilised because they allowed flexibility and systematic coverage of the issues. The interview guides targeted youths' lived experiences with climate variability, livelihood strains, food security concerns, disruptions to schooling, psychosocial well-being, coping and adaptive strategies and what people hoped for in the future. Interviews were carried out in Shona, which was the participants' preferred language, so the conversation could stay open and any language barrier would be reduced. Each interview typically lasted 45 to 90 minutes. After getting consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and then supported with field notes. Key informant interviews also added more depth, especially around local climate patterns, the role of institutions and how communities practise adaptation on the ground.

Interviews got transcribed verbatim and then translated, from Shona into English. To keep the meaning as close as possible and minimise translation bias, some selected transcripts were looked at independently by a bilingual researcher and if there were discrepancies they were sorted out through discussion. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. This analysis had six stages, basically starting with familiarisation with the data, then making initial codes, after identifying themes, followed by reviewing and refining the themes, defining, naming the themes and finally synthesising the results into one coherent analytical narrative.

Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant institutional authorities and permission to conduct the study was secured from local leadership structures. Participants took part on a voluntary basis and informed consent was secured from all participants before any data gathering started. Participants were also told that they could withdraw at any point. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld, using pseudonyms and the removal of identifying data from the transcripts. The audio recordings, transcripts and research notes were stored safely and accessed only by the research team members.

This study has a few methodological limitations. The sample of 10 youths and two key informants, all drawn from a single ward (Ward 16), restricts generalisability but suitable for an interpretivist case study approach. Also, focusing on youths aged 18-21 means younger adolescents 14-17 were left out and their lived realities may be different. University-affiliated scholars interviewing rural youths could have introduced a social desirability bias even if the team tried to build rapport via Shona-language interviews. The outcomes depended entirely on self-reported information, which was not triangulated with school records or household economic data. These constraints do not invalidate the study's claims, rather they qualify them and they also suggest a route for future multi-site and longitudinal research.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal that climate change has become a pervasive force shaping everyday lives of youths from vulnerable households in Buhera's Ward 16. Participants experience climate change not as a distant environmental issue but as a lived reality affecting food security, education, livelihoods, psychosocial well-being and future aspirations. Six interconnected themes emerged: declining agricultural productivity, food insecurity and nutritional stress, educational disruption, economic hardship and informal livelihoods, psychosocial stress and uncertainty and survival-oriented adaptation. These themes demonstrate how environmental instability translates into multiple forms of social vulnerability.

DECLINING AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY AND THE EROSION OF LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

A dominant theme was the declining reliability of subsistence agriculture. Participants constantly linked erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts and declining soil fertility to dwindling agricultural production and growing livelihood insecurity.

One participant explained:

> "Before, we used to rely on farming, but now with rains coming late or very little, we can barely harvest enough to feed the family. Last season, we planted maize and it all withered before it could even grow. Now, we have to depend on buying food at high prices at *kumatakada* (tuckshops), which we do not have much income for." (P4)

Similarly, another participant noted:

> "Traditionally, we depended on agriculture for the sustenance of our families. The yields would take us throughout the year. However, things have

changed. These days, the rains come too late or too early. At times, not at all. This makes our crops wither in the fields." (P7)

A key informant reinforced these observations:

> "We have seen a significant decline in crop yields, especially maize and groundnut, in Ward 16. Youth are largely affected because many families depend on farming for their livelihood. Droughts usually hit the vulnerable households. That makes food insecurity and malnutrition a grave problem among children and youths." (KII Z)

These accounts show how climate change is experienced as the erosion of livelihood certainty, rather than simply environmental variability. Agricultural decline was linked directly to food shortages, educational disruption, economic hardship and uncertainty about the future.

Food Insecurity and Nutritional Stress as Everyday Realities

Food insecurity emerged as one of the most immediate manifestations of climate change. Participants described reduced meal frequency, declining dietary diversity and growing dependence on purchased food despite limited household incomes.

One participant stated:

> "Sometimes we eat once a day or not at all. At other times, we go to bed leaving our stomachs empty with no food in the house. When the harvest fails, life becomes so hard." (P1)

Food insecurity affected more than nutrition. It undermined physical well-being, concentration and participation in daily activities. As one participant observed:

> "Hunger affects us badly. You cannot concentrate at school or do any proper work on an empty stomach. Sometimes we are weak the whole day." (P6)

A key informant similarly reported:

> "Food shortages are now something common in this ward due to drought and poor harvests. Youths from poor households suffer most because they rely on what the family produces." (KII Z)

These findings suggest that food insecurity serves as a central pathway through which climate change becomes embodied in everyday life, affecting health, education, productivity and well-being.

Educational Disruption and Interrupted Life Trajectories

Educational disruption emerged as a significant consequence of climate-induced livelihood stress. Participants described how household survival needs increasingly competed with educational commitments, resulting in absenteeism, interrupted learning and declining academic performance.

One participant recounted:

> "Last year, I missed school for a month during the planting season because my grandmother said I had to help on the fields since we were in need of food. Unfortunately, the crops failed again and now I am behind on my studies." (P3)

Another participant explained:

> "As for the youth from these unfortunate homes, education is so much disrupted by what we are confronted with. Very often, we have to take the livestock to rivers like Nyazvidzi for water. This task forces us to miss school." (P2)

A key informant confirmed this pattern:

> "Youths in this ward forego education regularly to assist their households, especially during planting and harvesting seasons. Climate change exacerbates the situation by making them more insecure for crops." (KII Y)

Participants saw educational disruption as more than a temporary setback. Many feared that interrupted education would reduce future opportunities and limit their chances of escaping poverty. Climate change, therefore, emerged not only as a threat to present well-being, but also as a force shaping future life trajectories and aspirations.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND DEPENDENCE ON INFORMAL LIVELIHOODS

Economic hardship emerged as another important consequence of climate-induced livelihood decline. Participants described how reduced agricultural productivity weakened household incomes and increased dependence on informal and often precarious livelihood activities.

One participant explained:

> "Because farming no longer works, we depend on small jobs and selling small things, but the money is never enough and the work is not guaranteed." (P5)

Another participant noted:

> "Sometimes we do piece jobs just to get mealie meal or a few dollars. If there is no work available, the family simply struggles." (P10)

These accounts show a loop-like relationship between climate change and poverty. When harvests fail, household income drops and families seek other livelihoods, often unsustainable. Instead of building routes to economic independence, climate shocks repeatedly nudge youths toward casual work, where growth is pretty limited and the future looks bleak. Although food insecurity, school disruptions and general economic strain hit participants involved, there were clear gendered differences. Young women, for example, more often described extra caregiving duties and also having to handle

household food shortages, which then cuts into time for schooling. These results imply that climate adaptation efforts should not treat everyone the same, because environmental pressure can shape labour roles, everyday time use and the actual chances for young women and young men inside rural households.

PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS, ANXIETY AND FUTURE UNCERTAINTY

Beyond material deprivation, participants described significant psychosocial consequences associated with climate change. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, hopelessness and uncertainty were common throughout the interviews and were often linked to concerns about food security, education and future livelihoods.

One participant stated:

> "You wake up not knowing whether there will be food or work. It stresses you because you do not see a future." (P6)

Another reflected:

> "Even when you try to plan something, you are not sure if things will work because the weather changes everything. Sometimes you just stop planning because you expect things to go wrong." (P9)

These narratives show that climate change affects not only the material conditions, but also how youths envision their future. It reshapes their whole sense of what comes next. Uncertainty seemed to be a key force behind emotional strain and it revealed that climate vulnerability covers psychosocial balance and health, not only economic trouble or environmental hardship.

EVERYDAY COPING AND SURVIVAL-ORIENTED ADAPTATION

Despite the challenges they faced, participants demonstrated considerable agency in responding to climate-related adversity. Various forms of adaptation emerged, including livelihood diversification, reliance on social support networks, mutual assistance and the use of local knowledge to navigate environmental uncertainty.

One participant explained:

> "When things are hard, we help each other in the community. At times, relatives can assist although these too have little [of their own]." (P5)

A key informant observed:

> "Communities are trying different ways of coping, but most of these strategies are aimed at surviving difficult conditions, rather than improving livelihoods." (KII Z)

These adaptive strategies show youth resilience while the environment keeps changing. The responses kept circling around immediate survival, rather than long-term transformation. Adaptation is seen as negotiated survival, living with poverty, scarce resources and not much institutional backing. Climate change is embedded in daily routines. It affects how youths eat, study, work and picture their futures. Resilience tends to mean survival when social- economic vulnerability strikes.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that climate change is experienced by youths in Buhera's Ward 16 not as a lone environmental phenomenon, but a constant social condition that remakes daily life across different connected aspects. Although climate change is usually explained using biophysical signs such as rainfall variability, drought frequency and agricultural productivity, participants revealed how it affects livelihoods, food security, education, psychosocial wellbeing and future aspirations. This supports the critical climate vulnerability literature which argues that environmental shifts are socially mediated through existing inequalities, the way institutions are arranged and how livelihood systems already work (Ribot, 2014; Nightingale *et al*., 2020; Trisos *et al*., 2022). Climate change is not just a biophysical event, it becomes a social phenomenon and its outcomes depend a lot on the setting where it happens.

The study also shows that climate change works as a vulnerability multiplier, rather than a single, stand-alone cause of suffering. When agricultural output declines, it does not end there. It triggers more problems across multiple parts of life. These include food security, education, household poverty, livelihood prospects, social ties and emotional balance. Climate change, therefore, is a cross-cutting force affecting economic, social, educational, nutritional and psychosocial outcomes at the same time. This aligns with the resilience idea of interconnectedness, where livelihoods, education, food security, mental well-being and household life are treated as connected systems.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF YOUTH TRANSITIONS

This study shows how climate change is remapping youth transitions into adulthood in rural Zimbabwe. Climate change scholarship has focused mostly on agricultural losses, livelihood disruption, household adaptation and community responses. Less attention has been given to how climate change

feeds into life trajectories, future hopes and the pathways to adulthood. Usually, education is described as a major route for social mobility, economic progress and independence from precarious household livelihoods. However, participants made it clear that educational interruptions happen, not because someone decided to stop, but because climate-related livelihood pressures pushed them off schedule. School attendance is disrupted when labour demands increased for household survival, including income producing activities, livestock management, water collection and caregiving responsibilities during episodes of environmental stress. These findings align with scholarship suggesting that climate shocks can contribute to school dropout through household labour re-allocation and rising opportunity costs (Nordman *et al*., 2022; Randell and Gray, 2023). Thus, climate change does not just affect what youths can do right now in education, it also shapes future chances for economic independence and social mobility. This finding goes beyond education itself. Educational disruption reshapes the broader transition to adulthood because it changes when youth enter the labour market, when households are formed and how quickly economic independence comes. When livelihood insecurity gets worse, many youths end up taking on adult responsibilities too early, while at the same time narrowing chances for skills development, credentialing and broader personal growth. Climate change, therefore, compresses youth transitions by speeding up entry into survival minded roles while blocking access to the resources that help a successful, dignified adulthood (Sumberg *et al*., 2021; Morrow, 2023).

FOOD INSECURITY AS AN EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The findings point to food insecurity as one of the main ways through which climate change becomes this lived, felt and embodied kind of experience for rural youths. Most existing studies have already shown empirical ties between climate variability and food insecurity across sub-Saharan Africa (IPCC, 2022; Trisos *et al*., 2022). However, this study makes it clear that food insecurity cannot be treated only as a nutrition, farming or financially related problem that one may quantify through caloric intake or via household dietary diversity scores. Instead, food insecurity works as a multidimensional, deeply physical experience, where climate stress becomes tucked into daily life, not just in a practical sense, but also in emotional, social and psychological ways that people carry with them. Participants did not talk about hunger like some distant marker or an abstract sign. They reported about it as a steady, gnawing presence,

something that shaped what their bodies could manage, how their minds could stay on task and how they pictured their futures.

People described hunger together with fatigue, physical weakness, lethargy and a sharply reduced ability to concentrate and these came up again and again, sometimes every day. What these accounts highlight is that climate driven food insecurity directly changes bodily functioning, cognitive potential and educational involvement in ways that the more numbers-based vulnerability checks often overlook. When someone struggles to focus in school, or cannot manage physical labour properly, or cannot keep energy through the whole day, or misses obligations because of drained capacity, it shows the embodied fallout of climate vulnerability that sits beneath the limit of most usual measurement systems (Hayes *et al*., 2021' Tschakert *et al*., 2021). From a critical resilience standpoint, food insecurity also shows how adaptive capacity is mediated by who has access to tangible resources. Thus, hunger is not only an outcome tied to food; it is also proof of constrained resilience that is produced by structural inequalities.

RESILIENCE AS NEGOTIATED SURVIVAL RATHER THAN TRANSFORMATION

The Resilience Theory, provides a useful insight into how youths react to climate driven difficulties, but the results suggest for a very careful line between survival focused coping and real transformative adaptation. The idea of negotiated survival fits that difference better than the usual resilience discourse. Negotiated survival is an ongoing and often tiring, routine where individuals and families juggle urgent dangers and keep basic functioning going, even when scarcity is chronic, institutions are thin or weak and the options available are severely limited. In contrast, transformative adaptation suggests growing capabilities, lowering exposure, or shifting the very settings that create the risk. Negotiated survival is mostly reactive and short-term by nature. Subsequently, it is "adaptation under duress", rather than adaptation as empowerment.

The findings indicated that youths are not adapting because brand new openings appeared somewhere. They are adapting because if they do not, survival inside the household is at stake, nutrition becomes worse and everyday functioning breaks down. Being able to name this separation matters because otherwise policy discussions end up romanticising resilience, as if it is automatically good

or always hopeful. Participants still showed a notable level of adaptability, for example. livelihood diversification, leaning on social ties, community-based cooperation and even the adaptive use of local knowledge systems. These behaviours concur with many capacities that resilience scholarship commonly highlights such as flexibility, learning by experience, mobilising social capital and innovating when the future is uncertain (Walker *et al*., 2004; Folke, 2006). However, the findings also show some clear limitations in the more conventional versions of resilience that often dominate policy. Even though people adapted to shifting conditions, most of what they did aimed at getting through the day and keeping the household alive, rather than transforming the long-term drivers of vulnerability. This outcome echoes what critical resilience scholars have been arguing: resilience should not be treated as a universally positive end point. Instead of empowerment or transformation, resilience in Buhera more often appears as negotiated survival, happening alongside persistent structural disadvantage and that changes how scholars should read the "success" stories people like to tell.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND THE LIMITS OF ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

Participants kept coming back to similar points: they described restricted access to livelihood chances beyond precarious informal work, uneven educational resources and weak support systems and a rather thin institutional presence from both government and non-governmental organisations. They also felt like they are near-total exclusion from climate related decision-making, at household level, within communities and even in governance spaces. Vulnerability is not only coming from climatic exposure, rainfall variability, or agricultural sensitivity, but also being shaped by wider systems (social, economic and political). As Adger (2000) discusses and as more recent work keeps reinforcing (Ribot, 2014; Nightingale *et al*., 2020), adaptive capacity depends more on whether people can access resources, receive institutional support, have political voice and actually hold decision-making influence. For the rural youth, adaptive constraints are often amplified by age-based marginalisation, not just by environmental factors alone.

Therefore, the findings suggest that adaptation cannot be reduced to better agricultural practices, early warning systems or climate smart technologies. It should also focus on structural issues such as chronic poverty, unequal

schooling access and the systematic exclusion of youths from governance roles. It also involves tackling livelihood insecurity and the very unequal access to productive resources such as land, credit and markets. If these structural dimensions are ignored, many adaptation interventions may end up addressing only the visible signs of climate vulnerability, while the deeper causes remain largely unaddressed. These findings support the central proposition from critical the Resilience Theory, where resilience is not determined only by what individuals can do, but, rather, it is profoundly shaped by how institutions are set up, how resources are distributed and how power works in everyday life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK AND CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

The findings of this study have real, practical consequences for social work practice climate governance, rural development policy and youth programming in Zimbabwe and in other places across sub-Saharan Africa that are also climate vulnerable. What youths described from Buhera's Ward 16 shows that climate change is not just about environmental damage or crop disruption or those more biophysical issues. It is a social matter, a social justice one because it affects livelihoods, education participation, psychosocial strength or weakness, physical health, social mobility, fairness between generations and even the range of options young people might have in the future. For that reason, one cannot respond to climate change with one kind of solution. There is need for multiple angles, cross-sectoral moves that deal with the environmental hazard and also the social, economic and political gaps where those hazards are felt, unevenly shared and "absorbed" by people.

For social work practice, the study supports the growing idea that climate change should be fully integrated into the Social Work Theory, assessment tools, intervention planning and policy advocacy (Dominelli, 2012; Ramsay and Boddy, 2021' Mathew, 2022). Social work has usually been about tackling poverty, vulnerability, exclusion, how families function and human well-being using casework, community organising and advocacy at policy levels. Climate change now shapes all of these concerns at once. Thus, it is difficult to separate social welfare from environmental realities. Social workers in rural settings have to broaden the usual assessment and intervention approaches and bring in climate-sensitive frameworks that recognise how environmental pressures connect with economic strain, education disruption, nutritional issues and

psychosocial challenges of youths. Participants often mentioned anxiety, uncertainty, hopelessness, ongoing worry and a strong concern about what comes next. However, psychosocial aspects of climate vulnerability still seem to get minimum attention in policy and programming, compared to more material outcomes such as food shortages, reduced income or lower agricultural performance. That means social work interventions should deliberately include mental health and psychosocial support services made for youths dealing with chronic climate-related stress.

For youth development policy, the findings imply that climate change is now becoming a major, even deciding, factor in youth development results across rural Zimbabwe. A lot of current youth development policies treat employment, education, entrepreneurship, health and social inclusion as separate siloed areas handled by different ministries, often with limited coordination. However, this study shows that climate change is increasingly influencing all of those areas, through interconnected pathways that cross the usual policy lines. Youth-centred climate change adaptation should therefore, include targeted actions that build climate-resilient livelihood pathways, including vocational skills development, climate-smart entrepreneurship programmes, digital skills training and support for youth-led enterprises that can function in environments that are getting more constrained by climate pressures.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of youths from vulnerable households in Buhera's Ward 16, Zimbabwe, mostly trying to see how climate change ends up shaping daily life. It also affects livelihood opportunities, education involvement, psychosocial well-being and then the kind of adaptive responses that people manage to build. Using a critical resilience lens and qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with 10 youths plus two key informants, the study suggests that climate change for rural youths, is not something abstract or distant, such as an environmental issue that can be fixed simply by technical solutions. It is a wide social reality that increasingly organises the conditions people are already living in, what they think might come and the meaning of growing up in rural Zimbabwe.

The findings indicate that climate change affects youths through several pathways and these pathways are connected. For example, falling agricultural

output weakens household livelihood security, which then feeds into chronic food insecurity, nutritional stress, disruption of education, economic precarity and heavy psychosocial distress. These are not just separate challenges that can be handled one at a time. The study further demonstrates climate change is actively reorganising youth transitions into adulthood in ways that much of the scholarship has only started to theorise. Much of climate research has tended to emphasise agriculture impacts, household coping and responses at community scale. The evidence indicates climate variability is increasingly steering educational pathways, influencing livelihood decisions, shifting employment routes, changing household roles, affecting psychosocial development and altering chances for social mobility. Climate change is not just affecting rural livelihoods; it is also reshaping the routes through which youths picture and pursue. Youth vulnerability stretches beyond environmental hazards. It includes the systematic shrinking of opportunities, aspirations, life chances and the range of what can realistically be imagined. The study adds to critical resilience work by disputing the usual narrative that adaptation automatically equals successful transformation. In rural Zimbabwe, climate change is not only an environmental crisis. It is also a crisis of livelihoods, opportunity, well-being, generational fairness and social justice, even when those terms are usually under focused by scholars.

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