

# Quench our thirst! Access to water is a right

## Improving access to safe water in urban Zimbabwe



Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC)  
Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)  
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### "Dams are full but taps are dry!"

- Participant in a water scenarios dialogue meeting, 5th December 2014, Harare

Water is central to human survival: it is a determinant of health and is vital for economic activity. There are differences in access to safe water between rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe. There are also differences within urban areas. For informal residents and workers, lack of access to safe water adds to insecure incomes and poor living conditions.

As people experience more extreme weather, with droughts and flooding, we are increasingly aware of the need to protect and manage our water resources, and to ensure fair access to water. Our project, 'From surviving to thriving', gathered evidence and built shared learning from the lived experience and views of informal workers and informal settlements in urban areas of Zimbabwe on the importance of water for work, daily lives, health, and to manage climate change. This leaflet discusses their experience, the many roles that water plays, and how to better deliver on their right to safe water.

## Water is a right and critical for life, work, and well-being

### Water is a right

Zimbabwe's Constitution provides for the right to water, as shown in the box. So too do international conventions that the Zimbabwe government is a signatory to. As a right, everyone should have access to the safe, affordable water they need. Access to safe water and sanitation are in Goal 6 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Access to safe water and sanitation is central to life and human development.

### Water is essential for health and well-being

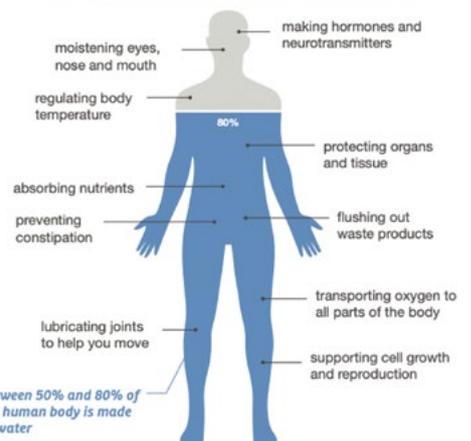
Our bodies need water to be able to perform many vital functions, as shown in the graphic on the right. As communities, we need water for good hygiene and handwashing, to clean and prepare safe food, to wash clothes and grow vegetables and other foods.

We have seen what happens when we don't have adequate water, with cholera and typhoid epidemics, as well as other diarrhoeal diseases and skin infections. Handwashing is a key hygiene measure for COVID-19 prevention. Having enough water to drink is essential in hot climates, such as in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, diarrhoeal diseases, largely due to poor access to safe water, were ranked fifth as the major cause of death and disability. Diarrhoeal disease in children contributes to malnutrition and lost school days, and affects academic performance. Having to go long distances to find water or buy it at high cost is a burden, especially for women who often take on these roles.

**Zimbabwe's Constitution Sec 77 says:** Every person has the right to--  
a. safe, clean and potable water; and  
sufficient food; and the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within the limits of the resources available to it, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right.

Drinking plenty of water every day is important for good health. Your body relies on water for many functions, such as:



Source: Health Direct, online

## Water is a key input in production and in society

Water is a critical input in our production processes, whether as an ingredient for manufactured products, for cleaning raw materials, for managing waste and by-products from production activities, and to support plant and animal life for agriculture. Many workers in Zimbabwe, especially those in the informal sector, work in open, exposed conditions and heat, where water is essential to keep hydrated. The ecosystems and environments that we depend on also depend on water. Rising levels of water stress, such as from scarcity and climate change, may become a source of conflict. We cannot survive in a world without water!

## Accessing safe water in urban areas

Growing urban populations are increasing the demand for water. Densely housed urban populations are more exposed to the spread of the infectious diseases noted earlier, and thus have an even greater need for water. If the water supply is not safe, reliable, and affordable in urban areas it can lead to the rapid spread of epidemics, and undermines decent lives, decent work and healthy public spaces. It can also lead poor people to gather water from dirty sources, or wealthier people to drill independent boreholes that deplete underground water supplies. Neither of these options is better than having a reliable public sector water system that reaches all with safe water. When companies sell water as a commodity, poorer households cannot afford it. Those working and living in informal settings are vulnerable to these deprivations.



Accessing water from unsafe sources in urban Zimbabwe.  
Source: Daily Maverick, 2020

In the past, urban areas had better access to water and sanitation services than rural areas. However, while the pipes are still there today, the taps are often dry. Urban water systems have been affected by inadequate investment, with non-functional infrastructure and water treatment plants that cannot meet the increase in demand from rising populations or the rising pollution of water bodies. Electricity cuts affect the pumping of water to households and the poor maintenance of infrastructure leads to leaks and other wastage. Rusty and leaking pipes reduce the amount and quality of water that reaches households and raises the risk of the water being contaminated by sewerage from broken sewer systems.

In 2015, four out of five urban households went without water for one day or more within a two week period, according to government data.

### HOW OFTEN ARE HOUSEHOLDS GOING WITHOUT WATER IN ZIMBABWE?



Data source: ZDHS, 2015

Not everyone in urban areas is equally affected. Poorer households often bear the brunt of water shortages. Our findings in informal settlements and workers confirm the findings of surveys such as the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey that water collection is mainly carried out by women, adding to their other household roles. Urban water collectors spend up to 30 minutes travelling to collect water. This is not only a burden for women. For people living with disabilities, it can be a major barrier to accessing sufficient water for health.

 "Women are not safe. We wake up when it is dark to go and look for water and have no public streetlights. We have had three cases of women who were sexually abused."

- Research survey respondent, Masvingo

## Growing demand and challenges

These challenges in urban water supplies and the deprivation of rights to water are likely to grow worse without a strong response. Urban populations are growing. Extreme weather events with heatwaves and drought are becoming more common. People have encroached onto wetlands to build homes and offices. Borehole drilling has lowered the water table. Damage to plant and other natural resources has exposed water sources while formal and informal manufacturing are polluting water sources. In urban areas such as Masvingo, as mining activities come closer to urban areas, there are concerns over chemical contamination of urban water sources.

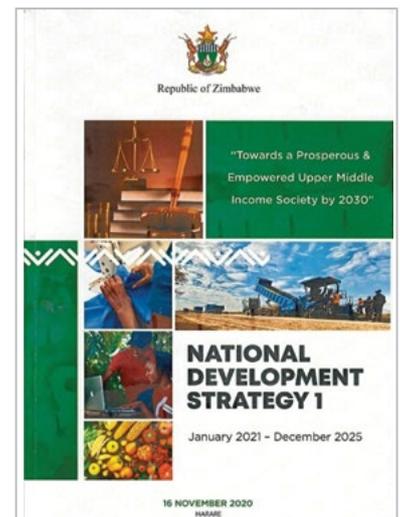
Water has become a commercial commodity with a rising price. As underfunded municipal water systems fail to cope with rising demand, commercial bulk water suppliers are becoming more common, and more people are having to rely on bottled drinking water. These supplies raise costs for households that need to be monitored by local authorities, as do the health and environmental standards of commercial suppliers.

## Action calls on all involved

Central government, local authorities, the private sector, civil society and communities all have a role to play in improving access to safe water in urban areas.

**Central government** has a duty to meet the right to water for everyone, including informal residents and workers. The National Development Strategy recognises this duty and the need to ensure universal access to safe water and should prioritise:

- Improving water storage capacities
- Supporting municipal water and sanitation infrastructure, including treatment and wastewater recycling
- Finalising and communicating plans to ensure and monitor the safety and quality of drinking water
- Promoting wastewater recycling and the use of by-products like solid sludge to generate energy such as methane gas
- Reducing pollution and the pressure on urban freshwater sources by using safe wastewater for urban agriculture
- Involving the private sector and local universities in water monitoring, supply, and conservation technology development
- Monitoring peri-urban mining and reducing the contamination of surface and groundwater sources; and
- Providing a minimum quantity of publicly funded safe water to meet household needs in urban areas, with cost recovery tariffs above the free threshold.



It will be important for the state to allocate the resources and capacities for these strategies to move from policy to practice, and for public reporting on delivery of these goals.

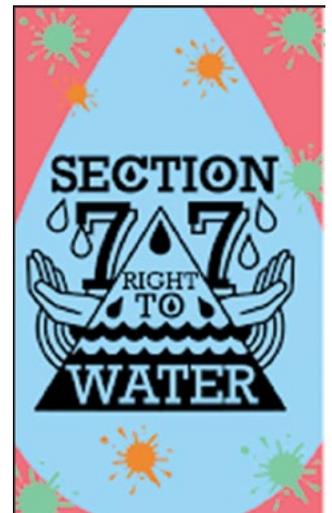
**Local authorities** also have a duty to deliver on the right to water for all in their areas. They play a key role in ensuring the treatment and infrastructure necessary to deliver clean water to end users. In our research and the local and national dialogue that followed, local authority actions included:

- Providing safe water as a right for all, including for informal residents.
- Including residents in informal settlements and informal workers in the planning and delivery of safe water, including the investment plans to maintain and expand infrastructures.
- Where permanent infrastructures are not yet in place, providing interim options such as water bowsers and infrastructures for water harvesting.
- Developing technologies for and ensuring that water quality monitoring not only focuses on points of water purification, but also along points of distribution and consumption, given the high risk of contamination between the source and the points of final use.

- Prioritise options for urban enterprise and employment, including for informal workers, in downstream wastewater collection, treatment and processing, and in producing energy and food from by-products that support nutrition and energy while protecting environments.
- Strengthening monitoring and management of water pollution from industrial, domestic, and peri-urban mining activities.
- Protecting urban wetlands from degradation and occupation and investing in their reclamation where they have been destroyed.
- Ensuring delivery of rights-based water costing, with a free band to cover basic services and cost recovery afterwards.

**Communities and their organisations** have a key role in protecting water resources, claiming rights to water, and ensuring delivery by duty bearers. For this, community actions include:

- Ensuring information flow between communities and service providers, such as to report vandalism, water leakages, pollution, and wetlands destruction.
- As citizen scientists, monitoring water pollution and quality to raise violations with the public and authorities.
- Monitoring public financial flows and private sector pricings relevant to water systems.
- Make timely payments of fair water bills.
- Building awareness and skills to support and carry out economic activities in urban wastewater value chains, including for green energy production.
- Widening community awareness on environmental and health protection.
- Widening literacy on and use of measures to reduce water demand including local technologies for water conservation.
- Participating in actions for the 'greening' of urban areas through planting trees, (including fruit trees that will also help with nutrition), and in wetland reclamation.



**Private sector organisations, banks and companies** have roles in:

- Not polluting water sources and reducing water use and wastage.
- Not building or implementing commercial activities on wetlands.
- Investing in production processes that conserve water and pre-treat wastewater.
- Controlling cost escalation of water related services and communicating the basis for service charges.
- Reporting on water quality monitoring and standards of products to public authorities.
- Investing in and supporting research, development and production of cost-effective water treatment solutions, technologies for water conservation and recycling, demand management, and water quality monitoring.
- Investing in and supporting actions for the 'greening' of urban areas through planting trees (including fruit trees that will also help with nutrition), and in wetland reclamation.

The actions we take on water today are not just for today- they will determine our health, our living and working conditions, the environments we live in, our economic possibilities, and our ability to manage climate challenges into the future.

## Acknowledgements

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