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SYSTEMIC RISK COMMUNICATION AND GOVERNANCE IN ZIMBABWE: A DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Zimbabwe communicates and governs systemic risks arising from climate change, with a focus on the institutional arrangements that shape community preparedness and adaptation. Grounded in the International Risk Governance Council (IRGC) Risk Governance Framework and the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), the study uses qualitative document analysis to interrogate 30 key policy and strategy documents produced between 2005 and 2024. The analysis identifies a predominately top down risk communication architecture, persistent gaps in multi-stakeholder engagement, and coordination shortfalls between national institutions and local communities. Although national policy instruments reflect growing awareness of climate risk and adaptation, practical implementation is constrained by institutional fragmentation, limited mechanisms for meaningful community participation, and underutilisation of indigenous knowledge and digital communication channels. The article concludes by proposing a set of governance and communication reforms to promote inclusive, timely, and actionable risk information, and outlines priorities for future research, especially on integrating indigenous knowledge systems and low cost digital tools into community centred risk governance.

KEYWORDS: Systemic risk; risk communication; governance; climate change; Zimbabwe; document analysis.

1. Background

Climate change is widely recognised as a systemic risk a phenomenon that does not manifest in isolation but interacts with social, economic, and ecological systems to produce cascading

impacts (IPCC, 2022). Unlike discrete hazards, systemic risks such as prolonged droughts, cyclones, and erratic rainfall disrupt multiple sectors simultaneously, including agriculture, water, energy, and public health. These effects extend across time and space, often compounding existing vulnerabilities and demanding integrated governance responses (Renn, 2017).

Zimbabwe is particularly exposed to such systemic climate risks. As an economy heavily reliant on rain fed agriculture, climate variability directly undermines food security, rural livelihoods, and national economic stability (Government of Zimbabwe, 2017). The recurrence of droughts and floods, coupled with extreme events such as Cyclone Idai in 2019, has highlighted both the urgency of effective governance and the severe consequences of communication breakdowns in early warning systems (Manyeruke, 2020). More recently, the 2024 drought, declared a national disaster, again illustrated the systemic vulnerabilities embedded within Zimbabwe's socio economic fabric (Reuters, 2024).

Over the past two decades, Zimbabwe has responded by developing an array of policy instruments, including the National Climate Change Response Strategy (2014), the National Climate Policy (2017), and ongoing National Adaptation Plan (NAP) processes (UNFCCC, 2024). These documents emphasise resilience building, disaster preparedness, and adaptation planning. However, the challenge lies not in the absence of policy frameworks but in the translation of policies into practice. Communication of risk remains heavily centralised, coordination among institutions is weak, and mechanisms for meaningful community participation are limited (Mavhura, 2018).

The importance of effective risk communication cannot be overstated. In contexts where trust in institutions is fragile, the way risk information is produced, disseminated, and interpreted determines whether communities take protective action or remain vulnerable. The IRGC Risk Governance Framework underscores the need for inclusive and adaptive governance, while the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) draws attention to how communication channels and trust dynamics amplify or attenuate the impact of risk messages (Kasperson et al., 1988; Renn, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how Zimbabwe's systemic risk governance and communication are framed in official policy documents from 2005 to 2024. It interrogates whether governance arrangements support or hinder community preparedness

and adaptation, and it identifies pathways for reform that could enhance resilience at both national and local levels.

2. Problem Statement and Research Questions

Problem Statement

Zimbabwe is highly vulnerable to systemic climate risks such as droughts, floods, and cyclones, which interact with socio economic vulnerabilities to produce cascading impacts on food security, health, and infrastructure. Although the country has developed a suite of climate change policies and disaster risk management strategies since 2005, communication and governance structures remain largely centralised and fragmented. The problem lies in the mismatch between policy intent and practical implementation: while policies articulate risk awareness, communication mechanisms often fail to reach communities in timely, clear, and actionable ways.

This disconnect has several consequences. Communities most at risk are often left uninformed or under-prepared, as seen during the 2015–2016 El Niño drought and Cyclone Idai in 2019, where many households reported inadequate early warning. Institutional fragmentation and weak coordination between agencies such as the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), Civil Protection Unit (CPU), and the Meteorological Services Department (MSD) exacerbate these gaps. Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems, which could complement scientific forecasts, remain marginalised in official communication frameworks. The persistence of a topdown, deficit model of communication undermines trust, slows adaptive action, and perpetuates vulnerability.

3. Research Questions

1.How are systemic climate risks communicated and governed in Zimbabwe's policy frameworks between 2005 and 2024?

2. To what extent do governance arrangements facilitate or hinder community participation in risk communication and decision making?

3. How do institutional coordination and communication pathways align with or diverge from the principles of the IRGC Risk Governance Framework and the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF)?

4. What practical reforms can strengthen risk communication and governance in Zimbabwe, particularly with respect to inclusivity, trust, and integration of indigenous and digital knowledge systems?

4. Literature

The study draws on two frameworks: the IRGC Risk Governance Framework (Renn, 2017; IRGC, 2017) and the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) (Kasperson et al., 1988). The IRGC framework emphasises inclusive, adaptive governance that links technical appraisal with societal values. SARF explains how risk messages are amplified or attenuated as they move through institutions, media, and communities, highlighting the importance of trust and cultural resonance. Combined, these frameworks allow assessment not only of policy design but also of how communication flows affect risk perception and action.

The literature shows that climate change is a systemic risk requiring integrative governance (IPCC, 2022). Risk communication scholarship emphasises clarity, timeliness, and trust (Pidgeon et al., 2003). In Zimbabwe, research highlights a gap between strong policy rhetoric and weak community level implementation (Mavhura, 2018). Indigenous knowledge remains underutilised despite its relevance for rural adaptation (Nyahunda, 2020). Digital tools, though promising, face infrastructural and literacy barriers (ITU, 2021).

5. Methodology

This study used qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). Thirty documents produced between 2005 and 2024 were purposively selected, including the National Climate Change Response Strategy (2014), the National Climate Policy (2017), and Zimbabwe's National Adaptation Plan submission (2024). Analysis was guided by IRGC categories (governance, assessment, management, communication) and SARF concepts (channels, trust, amplification). The approach enabled systematic examination of how risk governance and communication are framed in official texts.

6. Findings and Analysis

6.1 Policy landscape: Evolution of climate governance

Zimbabwe has progressively built its climate policy framework. The National Climate Change Response Strategy (2014) set the foundation, highlighting the need for integrated adaptation planning. The National Climate Policy (2017) formalised this recognition, calling for mainstreaming climate considerations into all development planning (Government of Zimbabwe, 2017). More recently, the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) submission (2024) outlined a roadmap for building resilience with explicit references to vulnerable groups (UNFCCC, 2024). Despite these advances, policies remain top down. Institutions such as the

EMA and CPU dominate the communication chain, while local authorities and traditional leaders are rarely given formal decision making powers.

6.2 Communication channels: Official versus practical realities

Policy documents mention multiple channels, media, community meetings, extension services, and increasingly mobile alerts. For instance, the Zimbabwe Early Warning for Food Security System (ZEWFSS) combines satellite data and household surveys to generate advisories (FEWSNET, 2022). However, evaluations reveal weak translation of technical forecasts into actionable advice for rural farmers.

During Cyclone Idai (2019), official forecasts were broadcast, but many residents in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts reported not receiving clear, timely warnings (Manyeruke, 2020). This underscores the gap between official communication channels and community level realities.

6.3 Stakeholder engagement: Consultation without participation

The National Climate Policy (2017) and NAP process (2019–2024) describe "stakeholder workshops," yet these are often limited to NGOs and government agencies. Sustained mechanisms for community level engagement are missing. This reflects a deficit model of communication, where information flows one way from experts to communities, rather than a participatory co-production of knowledge (Renn, 2017).

6.4 Coordination failures: Fragmentation across institutions

The Civil Protection Act (1989) mandates the CPU to coordinate disaster responses, but in practice, multiple ministries, agriculture, water, local government, overlap in responsibilities. District disaster committees exist but are underfunded and underequipped (Mudzonga, 2021). This institutional fragmentation leads to duplication, delays, and inefficiencies, particularly during emergencies.

6.5 Case illustrations: Droughts and cyclones as stress tests

2015 to 2016 El Niño drought: National-level warnings were issued, but delays in relief distribution and poor communication left many households vulnerable (FEWSNET, 2016).

Cyclone Idai (2019): Despite meteorological warnings, communication breakdowns meant many communities were unprepared, resulting in high fatalities and displacement (Manyeruke, 2020).

Both events highlight how policy frameworks exist on paper but fail in practice, especially at the interface between institutions and communities.

6.6 Emerging trends: Towards inclusivity and digital innovation

The recent NAP process (2022–2024) has begun experimenting with WhatsApp farmer groups, community radios linked with the MSD, and participatory vulnerability assessments (NAP Global Network, 2023). These innovations suggest growing recognition of inclusivity and technology, but they remain fragmented and heavily donor driven.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings show that Zimbabwe's policies acknowledge systemic risks but governance remains fragmented and communication top-down. Using IRGC, this reveals deficits in inclusivity and reflexivity. Applying SARF, risk messages are often attenuated due to institutional bottlenecks, mistrust, and cultural dissonance. Conversely, amplification sometimes occurs via NGOs, churches, and radio, but without institutionalisation.

Comparative cases highlight that Mozambique's community disaster committees and South Africa's digital advisories offer models Zimbabwe could adapt (UNDRR, 2020; Archer et al., 2019). Indigenous knowledge remains underutilised despite potential synergies with scientific forecasts. Digital innovation shows promise but must overcome rural infrastructure and literacy gaps. Overall, Zimbabwe faces a resilience paradox: internationally aligned policies but domestically weak implementation.

8. Recommendations

1. Inclusive platforms: Establish ward level risk committees, empower local leaders, integrate gender and youth perspectives.
2. Coordination: Create a National Risk Communication Coordination Unit, SOPs, and devolved funding.
3. IKS integration: Document and embed indigenous indicators into forecasts.
4. Digital tools: Expand SMS alerts, community radios, and digital literacy training.
5. Trusted messengers: Formally involve churches, NGOs, and schools.
6. Policy coherence: Update Civil Protection Act, align communication across climate policies.
7. Regional collaboration: Strengthen engagement with SADC Climate Services Centre.

9. CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe's climate policies reflect growing awareness of systemic risks but remain constrained by centralised structures, weak coordination, and limited community participation. Events such as the El Niño drought and Cyclone Idai exposed critical gaps in communication. Reforms must focus on decentralising communication, integrating indigenous knowledge, leveraging digital tools, and embedding trusted local actors. By doing so, Zimbabwe can transform risk communication into a cornerstone of resilience, offering lessons for the wider Southern African region.

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