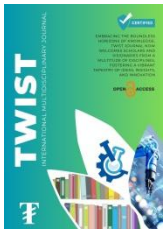
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Water as a Political Weapon in Bulawayo

Residents' Views and Sentiments from Zimbabwean Politicians

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Abstract
The water crisis in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, has persisted for decades despite numerous intervention strategies spearheaded by politicians, many of which have failed to produce meaningful and lasting results. This paper examines residents' perspectives and politicians' perceptions regarding the manipulation of this enduring crisis, highlighting how efforts to resolve it have remained largely fruitless. It traces the historical development of water shortages in Bulawayo and reviews the various intervention strategies that have been implemented over time. The study draws on a desk review of existing literature and data collected through semi-structured interviews with local residents, current and former councillors, and Members of Parliament across different wards in the city. The findings indicate that both residents and political leaders acknowledge the urgency of the water crisis and the need for a sustainable, long-term solution. However, such a solution appears contingent upon mutual understanding and cooperation among Zimbabwe's dominant political parties, with a focus on service delivery rather than political power. When access to a basic resource such as water is politicized, used to discredit opponents or to gain electoral support, it risks becoming deeply entrenched, to the extent that even viable solutions are obstructed by artificially created barriers. Persistent failure of interventions to produce lasting results suggests the presence of systemic challenges that require comprehensive, holistic approaches beyond mere political will. It is therefore essential for leaders to prioritise long-term sustainability and to meaningfully involve local communities in decision-making processes, ensuring that proposed solutions are responsive to their lived realities.

Keywords
City of Bulawayo, Gwayi-Shangani, Matebeleland Zambezi Water Project, politicizing water, water crisis

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The city of Bulawayo has a long-standing history of water shortages that remain unresolved, despite the potential for a lasting solution. This paper argues that the water crisis, which has caused considerable hardship for residents and contributed to the city's deindustrialisation, is largely rooted in Zimbabwe's political dynamics. Water shortages have increasingly been used as a platform for political campaigning and as a tool for mudslinging, as political parties compete for positions in local government, parliament, and national leadership. Sibanda (2018: 196) observes that "the city of Bulawayo has been a hotbed of political contestation centering on the management of water by the Bulawayo City Council and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), a government parastatal". While Sibanda's (2018) observation highlights the centrality of politics in Bulawayo's water crisis, this article pays particular attention to the conflict between the Bulawayo City Council (BCC) and ZINWA, as it constitutes a key aspect of the discussion. Although it is acknowledged that Southern Africa more broadly faces challenges of water scarcity (Makwara & Tavuyanango, 2012), this article contends that, in the absence of the politicisation of water shortages, Bulawayo's crisis could be permanently resolved. Musemwa (2006a) similarly argues that, to a large extent, water shortages in the city are artificial and man-made. It is important to emphasise that Bulawayo has the capacity to exist without persistent water shortages if its resources are effectively managed. The city is strategically located near several major rivers where dams could be constructed to address the crisis. In tackling its long-standing water challenges, Bulawayo could harness nearby rivers and alternative sources such as aquifers. The city is surrounded by rivers including the Zambezi, Umzingwane,

Shangani, Gwayi, Shashane, Tuli, and Simukwe, among others. With sufficient political will, these water sources could provide a sustainable and long-term solution to the crisis. Various scholars have offered differing perspectives on the persistence of water shortages in Bulawayo.

The water crisis in Bulawayo dates back to the colonial period (Musemwa, 2014). During this time, Black residents were denied access to adequate and quality water due to racially driven policies (Makwara & Tavuyanango, 2012; Musemwa, 2014; Sibanda, 2018). Musemwa (2006a) argues that, in the immediate post-independence period, the government neglected water provision in Bulawayo because the city was politically aligned with PF ZAPU, an opposition party to the ruling ZANU PF. According to Musemwa (2006a), the government effectively punished Bulawayo by obstructing its efforts to secure water from potential sources such as the Gwayi-Shangani Dam, the Gwayi–Khami confluence, and the Zambezi River, citing its association with what was labelled a "dissident political party", PF ZAPU. This suggests that the persistence of Bulawayo's water crisis can be attributed to sustained political interference, rooted in racial discrimination during the colonial era and evolving into ethnic and partisan dynamics after independence in 1980. The politicisation of water provision continued into the post-2000 period, particularly with the rise of a stronger opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which became dominant in Bulawayo following PF ZAPU's merger with ZANU PF in 1987 (Musemwa, 2006a; Hadebe, 2015; Sibanda, 2018). Although many urban centres came under MDC control after the 2000 elections, the argument remains valid because ultimate authority over urban infrastructure development resided with the Minister of Local Government, who was appointed from ZANU PF. Consequently, MDC councillors and members of parliament had limited decision-making power, thereby constraining their ability to effectively address the water challenges facing Bulawayo.

Bulawayo's water crisis has also been exacerbated by rapid population growth, suburban expansion, and aging infrastructure. While these dynamics are typical of urban development driven by rural–urban migration, they require corresponding investment in water provision. Bulawayo and its initial eastern and western suburbs were established in 1894 (Musemwa, 2006b), and the city has since expanded significantly (Magwaro-Ndiweni, 2011). However, this growth has not been matched by upgrades in water infrastructure. Despite a steady increase in population and housing since independence in 1980, the city's main water supply system has remained largely unchanged, with most dams dating back to 1976. Mukuhlani and Nyamupingidza (2014) note that although demand has risen sharply, no new dam was constructed for decades, despite the need being identified as early as 1986. Suburbs such as Emganwini, Cowdray Park, Pumula, Magwegwe, Nketa 9, Emhlangeni, and Selborne Park illustrate the scale of this expansion. Mtshabezi Dam, incorporated into the supply system in 2010 and operational by 2012, is a rare addition. In a responsive political environment, such demographic and spatial growth would be matched by adequate water infrastructure development, however, this has not been the case in Bulawayo.

During the 1991–1992 rainy season, Zimbabwe experienced low rainfall, resulting in drought and acute water shortages in Bulawayo. In response, the Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project (MZWP) was formed in 1991 to provide a long-term solution by drawing water from the Zambezi River and supplying communities along the pipeline (Gunby, Mpande & Thomas, 2001). Although described as a non-governmental initiative, the project was largely driven and funded by Bulawayo residents and the local business community, reflecting a collective response to state inaction. The formation of the MZWP was also rooted in perceptions that the ZANU PF government was exploiting water scarcity for political leverage. Following sustained advocacy, the government adopted the project into its five-year plan, with feasibility studies commencing in 1994 (Gunby et al., 2001). This led to the establishment of the Matabeleland Zambezi Water Trust (MZWT) in 1995, and the approval of feasibility studies in December 1995 and September 1996. Despite its urgency, the prolonged approval process raised concerns about the government's commitment to addressing Bulawayo's water crisis (Compagnon, 2011). The final feasibility study recommended a phased approach, beginning with the construction of a dam at Gwayi-Shangani, to be followed by a pipeline linking it to the Zambezi (Gunby et al., 2001). Notably, the prioritisation of the Gwayi-Shangani Dam ahead of the Zambezi pipeline appears to diverge from this sequencing, raising further questions about the implementation of the project.

The chairman of the MZWP was Dumiso Dabengwa, a prominent freedom fighter and senior PF ZAPU leader who later briefly joined ZANU PF. His leadership signalled that the project was both strategic and a response to dissatisfaction with the government's handling of Bulawayo's water crisis. The emphasis on "Matabeleland" in the project's name further underscored its grassroots origins and its deliberate distancing from central government control. In 2012, the government intervened and renamed it the National Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project (NMZWP), a move widely viewed as politically motivated rather than developmental. This "nationalisation" was met with criticism and suspicion, as many in Matabeleland believed it undermined the project's autonomy and risked sabotaging its progress (Moyo, 2024). In 2019, following sustained pressure, the government restored the original name, reverting NMZWP back to MZWP. This back-and-forth reflects regional disaffection with national development processes and a continued quest for autonomy amid perceived marginalisation. Beyond naming disputes, the project has also been marked by shifting implementation strategies. Although plans for the MZWP date back to 1912 (Vhumbunu, 2020), no water has yet reached Bulawayo. More recently, ZINWA proposed a phased approach:

> Construction of the Gwayi-Shangani Dam (Phase One); Construction of the pipeline from the Gwayi-Shangani Dam to a reservoir in Cowdray Park Suburb in Bulawayo (Phase Two); and Construction of a 245km pipeline from the Zambezi River to Gwayi-Shangani Dam (Phase Three) (Vhumbunu, 2020: 138).

Although Phase One has commenced, it has been characterised by repeated timeline shifts. ZINWA's involvement has also attracted scepticism, with concerns that it represents a government strategy to centralise control over water supply in Matabeleland and that the Gwayi-Shangani project may face further delays, as discussed later in this article.

ZINWA is a parastatal under the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development. It was established in 1998 through the Water Act (Chapter 20:25) (GoZ, 1998; Mapira, 2011; Mapanda, 2012) to manage, develop, and distribute water resources, including supplying urban areas (Sibanda, 2018). Its creation has, however, been widely interpreted as a move by the state to take over water provision from urban councils, many of which were controlled by the opposition MDC. Critics argue that ZINWA functioned as a political instrument to weaken these councils and reassert central government control, reinforcing claims that water scarcity was used for political ends (Mapira, 2011; Hadebe, 2015; Sibanda, 2018). Mapira (2011: 258) observes that "after its takeover, ZINWA dismally failed in service delivery thereby endangering the health of millions of urban residents". ZINWA's failure to deliver adequate services contributed to severe water and sanitation crises in urban areas (Mapira, 2011; Musemwa, 2014; Hadebe, 2015). This poor performance also justified the Bulawayo City Council's resistance to transferring water and sanitation responsibilities to the authority.

Mukuhlani and Nyamupingidza (2014) identify the conflict between the Bulawayo City Council (BCC) and ZINWA as a key contributor to the city's water shortages. It has been argued that, after failing to gain political control of Bulawayo through elections, the ZANU PF government established ZINWA to assume control over water management in the city. Both the BCC and residents resisted this move, viewing it not as an effort to improve supply but as a strategy likely to worsen an already fragile situation (Dube & Schramm, 2021). Given Bulawayo's vulnerability to water scarcity, such interventions were seen as susceptible to political manipulation. The Water Act of 1998 facilitated this takeover, with Sibanda (2018: 196) noting that "The Zimbabwe National Water Authority Act of 1998 marked the takeover of water management from the city council by the government of Zimbabwe". However, ZINWA assumed control without presenting a clear solution to the crisis, prompting strong resistance from the council, civic groups, opposition parties, and residents, who viewed the move as central government interference (Mukuhlani & Nyamupingidza, 2014; Muchadenyika & Williams, 2018; Sibanda, 2018; Dube & Schramm, 2021; Sivalo, 2021). Consequently, the government relented, allowing the BCC to retain responsibility for water distribution, although ZINWA took over most of the surrounding supply dams. Zvoushe (2025) argues that, ideally, central government should focus on water provision, while urban councils handle distribution. This division of roles became more apparent during the Government of National Unity (2009–2013), when ZANU PF and MDC formations jointly governed and renewed efforts to secure sustainable water sources for Bulawayo.

During the GNU, Mtshabezi Dam was incorporated into Bulawayo's water system, becoming the sixth supply source. Although completed in 1995 (Gulinck et al., 2001), it only began supplying Bulawayo in 2015 (Thebe, 2019), when the Ministry of Water Resources and Development was led by an MDC-T minister. At the time, other proposed sources included Gwayi-Shangani, Lower Tuli, Glass Block Dam, and the Nyamandlovu aquifer (Mkandla et al., 2005), while the existing supply dams were Insiza, Inyankuni, Lower Ncema, Umzingwane, and Upper Ncema. Mtshabezi was not originally intended to supply Bulawayo, but its proximity to Umzingwane made integration a practical solution to water shortages. However, the pipeline linking Mtshabezi to Bulawayo experienced repeated vandalism, widely suspected to be politically motivated, given the MDC-T's visibility in the project and its perceived threat to ZANU PF. Alternative explanations attributed disruptions to technical faults or even local beliefs about supernatural causes (Mukuhlani & Nyamupingidza, 2014). Although the pipeline became operational in 2012 (Zhou & Chilunjika, 2013; Mukuhlani & Nyamupingidza, 2014), it was only officially commissioned on 15 October 2015, after the GNU had ended. Musemwa (2004) further argues that the construction of Mtshabezi Dam symbolised ZANU PF's commitment to the 1987 Unity Accord with PF ZAPU, suggesting that the MDC-T could not legitimately claim credit for the project. This reinforces the argument that water provision in Bulawayo remains deeply politicised.

A new political era emerged with the rise of Emmerson Mnangagwa, who succeeded Robert Gabriel Mugabe after ruling Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. A key initiative under this "new dispensation" was the Gwayi-Shangani Dam, intended to provide a permanent solution to Bulawayo's chronic water shortages. However, the project has been marked by repeated delays. Initially scheduled for completion in 2019, the deadline was successively revised to December 2021 and then December 2022 (Vhumbunu, 2020). As of 2026, the dam remained incomplete, largely due to funding constraints. Moyo et al. (2023) question whether the project will ever be finalised, highlighting growing public scepticism. These persistent delays and unmet timelines have significantly eroded public trust in the government. Consequently, the Gwayi-Shangani project remains central to discussions on Bulawayo's water crisis, as it represents the most recent and prominent attempt to resolve the city's long-standing challenges.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative research design to analyse the views of politicians and Bulawayo residents. Such an inquiry requires close engagement with participants' perspectives. It has been argued that maintaining neutrality in qualitative research depends on collecting data that accurately reflects participants' views (Given, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Accordingly, the study sought to explore perspectives on the politicisation of Bulawayo's water crisis. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with selected politicians and residents directly affected by the crisis. Residents provided insights based on lived experiences, while politicians, as decision-makers, offered perspectives on the

constraints affecting consistent water provision. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. A total of 27 individuals were interviewed, comprising five politicians and 22 residents. The political participants, all based in Bulawayo, included one Member of Parliament and four councillors. In addition, articles published between August 2011 and January 2013 in the government-controlled, Chronicle daily newspaper, in which the Mtshabezi water pipeline project featured, were utilised in the study.

A thematic approach was used for both data presentation and analysis. The key themes that emerged included distrust in government efforts to resolve Bulawayo's water crisis, the use of water as a political tool, corruption, lack of commitment, limited transparency by both the BCC and central government, inadequate funding, and a lack of unity of purpose. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were neither recorded during data collection nor disclosed in the study. Instead, the 27 participants were anonymised as Participant 1 to Participant 27, with no link to their real identities. Participants 1–22 were Bulawayo residents, while Participants 23–27 were politicians drawn from ZANU PF and the CCC (Citizens Coalition for Change). This approach safeguarded participants' identities, adhering to research ethics and protecting them from potential risks associated with expressing politically sensitive views.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented under four major themes that emerged from the data and these are general perspectives about the water crisis facing Bulawayo, regionalism, corruption, and sabotage and counter accusation.

Perceptions of Bulawayo Residents and Political Actors on the Water Crisis

Bulawayo residents largely attributed the city's water crisis to a lack of government commitment, arguing that the problem could have been resolved long ago with sufficient political will. Commenting on delays in the Gwayi-Shangani project, Participant 1 stated:

> I am beginning to think they are going to delay the completion of this project until the next election campaign so that they will use it as a tool for campaigning. It's clear, the water situation in our region is supposed to be declared a national disaster and dealt with seriously, government must fund the project, double the machinery and workforce so that people get enough water, this has been going on for years and years people have lost hope in this mega project, they doubt if it's going to be completed.

This view suggests that delays are perceived as deliberate, aimed at securing political mileage for the ruling ZANU PF during election periods. Supporting this, Political commentators like Gorden Moyo an opposition politician and the late Edward Simela of Bulawayo United Residents Association were quoted saying that the projects are resurrected towards elections only to hibernate until the next elections (Musemwa, 2006; Sibanda, 2018). Such claims point to a prioritisation of political gain over resolving the water crisis. Similar concerns emerged from Participant 6, who noted, "the government seems not to be giving enough funds to the Gwayi-Shangani as the minister of finance allocate enough funds". However, other participants expressed support for government efforts. Participant 4 remarked "Since our government is not under IMF and is under sanctions, it depends on its budget only to fulfil its goals, no matter the Gwayi-Shangani was started long back during colonialism, it will be finished under the government of ED". Despite perceptions of underfunding, official statements suggest otherwise. The Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion, led by Mthuli Ncube, reportedly allocated US$2.5 million toward the project. As he stated, "We also continue to invest in water sector. For example, last week, we released about US$2,5 million towards the Lake Gwayi-Shangani Dam, as an example" (The Chronicle, 19 March 2025). This contrast between public perception and official claims raises questions about persistent delays, despite reported funding, and reinforces broader concerns about commitment to resolving Bulawayo's water crisis.

Concerns about the government's commitment were among the most frequently expressed during data collection. Participant 5 highlighted a lack of urgency in addressing Bulawayo's water crisis, stating:

> The current weather patterns indicate that the catchment area for Bulawayo supply dams is drought prone. The most worrying concern is the urgency behind this. If we had been proactive from the 1980s droughts, we wouldn't be experiencing the current water situation. The city is growing and there seems to be no urgency in addressing the water situation. The Zambezi water project might be a long-term solution but it comes with its own challenges as we have not had significant flows into the Zambezi of late resulting in low hydro electricity generation for both Zambia and Zimbabwe. Our infrastructure is also too old and needs a complete revamp.

Similarly, Participant 10 remarked:

> It is unfortunate that the Gwayi-Shangani project is still incomplete. This project should have been completed long back. In 1980 the Rhodesian government left some money for the project as it was already in the plans, and it worries where all those funds went to as there are still no answers. It is very clear that there are some in government who would not want to see this project being completed.

These sentiments reflect declining public trust in the government's efforts to resolve the crisis. As a result, some residents have begun pursuing community-driven solutions. Participant 17 explained:

> In 2020 we successfully ran a campaign called Zambezi Water for Bulawayo in which we had been promised and assured that the Shangani Dam and the pipe to Bulawayo will be complete by now, however, the situation remains unchanged. Because of this, there is a need for us to re-engage and to try and help the situation the best way we can. As a result, we have decided to restart the Zambezi Water for Bulawayo initiative to see how we can work with the city council, the government and other stakeholders to see how we help alleviate the situation.

This shift has led to the formation of citizen-led initiatives such as Amanzi Trust ("amanzi" meaning water in Ndebele). Participant 19, one of its leaders, noted:

> Amanzi Trust is currently implementing the Bulawayo Revival Team project popularly known as BRT, where we are working closely with city council and other stakeholders in reviving Bulawayo in various programmes including re-industrialisation, start-up business syndicates, youth training on transferrable skills and community projects. My hope is that we can rekindle our enthusiasm on the water project and view other ways of alleviating the problem. We must look at short term, medium term and long-term solutions for water in our beloved city. We must find a way within us very soon.

These responses reveal two key issues, that is, widespread dissatisfaction with political leadership in managing not only water but broader urban development, and a growing belief that sustainable solutions may need to come from within the community rather than relying solely on political actors.

Efforts to improve Bulawayo's water supply have implications beyond the city, particularly for communities affected by large infrastructure projects such as the Gwayi-Shangani Dam. Participant 2 raised concerns about displacement in Binga, noting:

> I am quite aware that Bulawayo is in urgent need of water. However, Gwayi-Shangani dam has lots of unresolved issues in Binga. This dam will submerge approximately 503 households, 1 school and dip tanks simply because the government in not expeditiously working on the settlement programme for these people. As you advocate for access to water also think of the Tonga people affected by this dam hazard.

This highlights the social costs of the project and the need to balance urban water needs with the rights and welfare of affected communities. Other participants attributed the persistence of the water crisis to limited technical expertise among political leaders. Participant 1 noted that "The council is led by civil engineers and lawyers only. This creates knowledge gap at management level. Even the mayor is a lawyer, it's like you are running a law firm". Similarly, Participant 3 emphasised the need for both short and long-term technical solutions:

> The water project cannot be finished overnight as it takes more time compared to project management. For short term plan, more boreholes should be sunk, monitoring or replacing old pipes should be done in all the areas. Failure to repair them will cause more problems. Also skilled personnel should be employed with relevant qualifications where both practical and theory are of great importance.

Infrastructure limitations were also identified as a major challenge. Participant 7 observed:

> Besides drought, our major challenge in Bulawayo is that we have inadequate infrastructure that is meant to service a large population. Even if we get good rains, we will continue experiencing water shortage because the catchment areas behind our five dams are damaged and silted due to gold panning.

These views point to structural and environmental constraints, aging infrastructure, skills gaps, and degraded catchment areas, while also raising concerns about insufficient regulatory enforcement, particularly regarding activities such as gold panning that threaten water sources.

Participant 14 said that "The government would rather leave us to blame BCC, yet it is ZINWA's duty to attend to our supply dams. Their excuse will always be that there is no budget for dam scooping but once there is evidence of Gold in the dams, you will see Harare scoopers in a whiff". While this reflects frustration with institutional accountability, attributing leadership shortcomings to professional background is misplaced, as professions such as law can contribute valuable governance skills. Beyond the Gwayi-Shangani project, participants emphasised alternative, locally driven solutions. One such initiative is the Glass Block Dam, which the Bulawayo City Council has undertaken to pursue independently, including through public–private partnerships. Supporting this approach, Mthuli Ncube stated, "And then for the Glass Block Dam in Bulawayo, we are again saying the (Bulawayo) City Council should go ahead and have that done on a public-private partnership basis" (The Chronicle, 19 March 2025). Participant 11 reinforced the need for self-

reliance by saying "To wait for assistance from the government would not help us at all, all of us will die without seeing that help. Let's try whatever we can afford to do as residents of Bulawayo so that we can resolve out water crisis". Some residents have also adopted apolitical approaches, distancing the issue from partisan contestation. Participant 9 proposed that "In resolving this water problem we need to remain apolitical and embrace interdenominational, multifaith and diversity as a cosmopolitan society that we are". These perspectives suggest a growing shift away from reliance on government, with residents increasingly turning to community initiatives, public–private partnerships, and even faith-based approaches to address Bulawayo's water crisis.

Regionalism

One of the challenges identified by participants as undermining a sustainable water supply was regionalism. Participants expressed concern that other regions in Zimbabwe are favoured while Bulawayo is marginalised. They also noted that efforts to address Bulawayo's water crisis are often outsourced to service providers from other regions through tenders. One respondent remarked that when Bulawayo's supply dams need resuscitation, companies are brought in from Harare. Participant 24, a politician, said, "If Bulawayo dams are to be scooped, ZINWA would bring excavators from Harare to clean our dams for high paid tender". Similarly, Participant 13 said, "The Gwayi-Shangani dam project will take forever because it is in the wrong province". In the same vein, Participant 2 stated, "This project will stay unfinished for a long time because the dam is being built in the wrong province". The notion of a "wrong province" suggests that participants perceive government water projects to be prioritised based on political preference, with Bulawayo believed to be marginalised due to its voting history, which has not favoured the ruling party since independence.

Some participants argued that if the Gwayi-Shangani water project were intended to benefit regions outside Matabeleland, it would have been completed sooner. Participant 4 stated, "If this project was in Harare, it will be completed by now". Similarly, Participant 9 remarked, "The Mthwakazi people should just know that these people are taking Matabeleland for granted, the government is not serious at all about the water crisis in Bulawayo". The use of the term *Mthwakazi* reflects a strong sense of regional identity and perceived separation, as it is often associated with pro-Matabeleland activism, including calls for secession. Participant 6 echoed this sentiment, stating that "Matabeleland is cursed under the current governance as such basic issues as water crisis are ignored". However, not all participants attributed Bulawayo's water crisis to regionalism. Participant 27, a politician, argued that Harare also faces serious water challenges, noting, "In Harare water may be available but it is not safe at all as you know that when you are there you cannot drink water from the tape because of the claim that their water is sewer contaminated". Likewise, Participant 13 observed, "The Gwayi-Shangani project is no different from Tugwi-Mukosi which was started in 1928 but only completed in 2016". These views indicate that while some participants blame the government for selectively prioritising water development across regions, others contend that neglect is not unique to Matabeleland but reflects broader national challenges in water provision.

Corruption

The research participants identified corruption as the primary obstacle to the provision of uninterrupted water supply in Bulawayo. They believed that funds allocated for water projects are often misappropriated by politicians. Participant 3 noted, "These water projects have been on the cards for decades of poor planning coupled with corruption by the politicians has led us to where we are about lack of water in Bulawayo". Similarly, Participant 9 stated, "This Gwayi-Shangani dam project is a looting project, the aim is not to complete it anytime soon", suggesting that some politicians benefit from prolonging such projects. Other participants highlighted that although the national budget repeatedly allocates funds to address Bulawayo's water crisis, particularly for the Gwayi-Shangani project, there is little tangible progress. They argued that these funds are misused. Participant 11 remarked, "Every year we see the budgets being announced and, in those budgets, Gwayi-Shangani is always given money to complete the project but until today nothing is clear. It means that the money for the project is going into the wrong hands". These views suggest a perception that water infrastructure projects are undermined by corruption, with resources diverted from their intended purpose. This reinforces the argument that water provision in Bulawayo is shaped by political processes, where unmet budget promises leave residents in prolonged uncertainty and dependency on political will for resolution of the crisis.

During the interviews, participants were asked about the possibility of Bulawayo residents contributing a stipulated amount towards resolving the water crisis, and all responses indicated that such funds would likely be misused. They argued that any such arrangement would be vulnerable to political interference, resulting in the diversion of funds before project completion. Participant 5 stated, "If all households in Bulawayo are to pay a certain amount of money, the situation will even be worse because nothing will come out of that. Politicians will take that money and convert it to their own use". Participants also referred to past experiences, particularly the MZWP, as evidence of failed contribution-based initiatives. Participant 8 explained:

> Somewhere from around the 1990s to around early 2000s, we used to contribute a certain amount of money every month per household towards the Zambezi Water Project which we were promised was going to end the water crisis in Bulawayo, but until today we still don't know what happened to that money because we never saw any water coming to Bulawayo. I doubt if there is anything that would change today if we were to make those contributions again because that money would still be stolen.

Further probing confirmed that residents indeed paid a monthly MZWP levy through the Bulawayo City Council alongside rent payments. This levy, however, appears to represent one of the failed participatory strategies for addressing the city's water crisis, reinforcing perceptions of mistrust in fund management and implementation processes.

Sabotage and Counteraccusation

Cases of mutual blame among political parties, as well as allegations of sabotage, have also been reported. Claims of interference in water provision to Bulawayo date back to the period when the MZWP was active. According to Anyachebelu et al. (n.d: 13):

> The Matabeleland Zambezi Water Trust was once in charge of finding and allocating funds for the MZWP, but, as the project became more prominent the national government began to take the project over claiming to be able to obtain the funds more efficiently. Dabengwa accused the government of interfering and sabotaging the MZWT's attempts to obtain funding on multiple occasions.

The government's increasing involvement in the MZWP was interpreted by some segments of society and political actors as a form of sabotage. Dabengwa, who chaired the MZWT responsible for mobilising funds for the project, was a prominent liberation war hero and politician. He was formerly part of ZANU PF following the Unity Accord between ZANU PF and PF ZAPU, later leaving to re-establish ZAPU, where he served as president until his death on 23 May 2019. This political background is relevant in illustrating how party politics intersects with water governance debates in Bulawayo. Research Participant 22, a politician, similarly argued that Dabengwa's efforts were undermined, stating that "Dabengwa did his best in trying to bring water to Bulawayo through the Zambezi Water Project, but the money that he raised disappeared in Harare". However, this claim remains an individual perception and cannot be independently verified.

During the GNU, allegations of sabotage through vandalism of water infrastructure intended for Bulawayo also emerged, particularly regarding the Mtshabezi pipeline. As noted earlier, the Minister of Water Resources Management and Development at the time was from the MDC-T, a party in political competition with ZANU PF. Newspaper reports from 2011 to 2013 show that MDC-T-led initiatives sought to augment Bulawayo's water supply by transferring water from Mtshabezi. The Chronicle (13 August 2011) reported delays attributed to ministerial performance, stating that "PM Tsvangirai, however, could not admit failure by Minister of Water Sipepa Nkomo, who was tasked under the Government Work Plan to ensure speed completion of the project" (Chronicle, 13 August 2011). Although initial timelines set completion for December 2011, this was later revised to June 2012 (Chronicle, 09 May 2012). However, the deadline was missed again, with the Chronicle (27 June 2012) reporting that the Mtshabezi pipeline had already missed four deadlines in 2011 alone. The Minister subsequently blamed delays on the State Procurement Board (Chronicle, 27 June 2012). Further reports indicated administrative and contractual disputes, including conflicts between companies awarded the electrification tender and the State Procurement Board (Chronicle, 17 July 2012). A joint ministerial tour by Dr Ignatius Chombo (ZANU PF) and Dr Sipepa Nkomo (MDC-T) in October 2012 reaffirmed that the Mtshabezi project would reduce Bulawayo's water shedding from 72 hours by 24 hours once completed, while positioning Gwayi-Shangani as the long-term solution with a projected 36-month completion period (Chronicle, 18 October 2012). However, despite the completion of the Mtshabezi pipeline, water shedding in Bulawayo remains high, officially at 72 hours but reportedly ranging between 96 and 144 hours per week in some suburbs. Similarly, the Gwayi-Shangani project has extended far beyond its projected timeline and remains incomplete as of 2026.

After several efforts and multiple missed deadlines, the Chronicle (17 December 2012) reported that the Mtshabezi pipeline had begun pumping water to Bulawayo. However, the Minister of Water alleged that the Harare-based company contracted to install the generators sabotaged the project, leading to the involvement of another firm previously engaged in the Tugwi-Mukosi project. Minister Sipepa Nkomo was quoted as saying:

> We are convinced that technicians from AC Controls of Harare did not know what they were doing. I can only sum up this as nothing but sabotage of the highest order. They hoped that if they connect this wire and this wire, things would work. Because of the desperate measures we are applying now, we had to take engineers from Salin, those who are doing Tokwe Mukorsi (sic) Dam (Chronicle, 17 December 2012).

However, on 18 December 2012, the Chronicle reported that water from Mtshabezi Dam had still not reached Bulawayo. The then mayor, Councillor Thaba Moyo, expressed frustration, stating, "I am now tired. All we need is water. I just wish that this project can be concluded. I hope next time I speak about Mtshabezi, we will be officially commissioning the project" (*Chronicle*, 18 December 2012). This remark reflects growing awareness of the politicisation surrounding Bulawayo's water crisis. Further, the Chronicle (10 January 2013) reported allegations of vandalism on the Mtshabezi pipeline. Minister Sipepa Nkomo stated, "We discovered three holes that were deliberately made in the pipes using a sharp instrument. The vandalised section covers four kilometres and is in a bush, away from settlements" (Chronicle, 10 January 2013). These developments illustrate that efforts to resolve Bulawayo's water crisis have been persistently hindered by delays, technical challenges, and competing claims of sabotage, reflecting the complex political and administrative environment surrounding water provision.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study bolster the central claim that the persistence of Bulawayo's water crisis cannot be explained solely by environmental scarcity or infrastructural deficits. Instead, it is deeply rooted in political contestation, where water has been strategically utilised as a political instrument by rival parties, particularly ZANU PF and the Citizens Coalition for Change (formerly MDC-T). The discussion places these findings within wider academic debates on hydro-politics and governance in Zimbabwe. Testimonies from both residents and political actors indicate that the crisis has been intentionally prolonged through calculated political actions, with incomplete projects and delayed interventions being tactically deployed for electoral advantage. Participants' observations that major initiatives, such as the Gwayi-Shangani Dam, tend to re-emerge during election periods align with earlier assertions that development projects in Zimbabwe are often "resurrected towards elections only to hibernate thereafter" (Musemwa, 2006a; Sibanda, 2018). This recurring cycle of inactivity and selective action illustrates the politicisation of scarcity, whereby deprivation is transformed into a tool for political mobilisation rather than an issue requiring resolution.

The study's results further support Musemwa's (2006a, 2014) argument that Bulawayo's water problems are largely "artificial and man-made," shaped by both historical and ongoing political dynamics. The post-independence era demonstrates how the ruling party, ZANU PF, is alleged to have withheld infrastructural development in opposition-dominated areas such as Bulawayo as a means of political retribution (Musemwa, 2006a). This trend appears to have continued into the multi-party period, where opposition dominance in urban councils has intensified disputes over water governance. For example, the creation of the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) has often been interpreted as an effort by the central government to regain influence over urban administrations controlled by opposition forces (Mapira, 2011; Hadebe, 2015; Sibanda, 2018). In this setting, water governance becomes a contested political arena rather than a neutral administrative responsibility. The study also reveals how both ruling and opposition parties engage in reciprocal accusations of sabotage, further deepening the crisis. Incidents such as the reported vandalism of the Mtshabezi pipeline during the Government of National Unity (GNU) period illustrate how political rivalries can directly undermine service delivery. These dynamics mirror what Dube and Schramm (2021) term the "politics of locality," where access to essential resources is shaped by political alignment and conflict. The tendency among political actors to shift blame onto their opponents not only avoids accountability but also entrenches systemic dysfunction.

Corruption emerges as another key factor reinforcing the view that water is deployed as a political instrument. Participants' beliefs that funds designated for water projects are frequently diverted indicate that the crisis is perpetuated through rent-seeking practices. This observation is consistent with Mapira's (2011) finding that corruption and inefficiencies within water governance institutions have significantly weakened service delivery. In such circumstances, large infrastructure projects like Gwayi-Shangani serve more as opportunities for accumulation rather than genuine development, with extended implementation timelines allowing continuous financial extraction. At the same time, politicisation has diminished public confidence in both state institutions and political leaders. The shift among residents toward community-based responses, including the revival of local water campaigns and the formation of civic organisations, reflects growing dissatisfaction with formal governance systems. This trend supports Muchadenyika and Williams' (2018) argument that centralisation and political interference in urban governance undermine local capacity and erode citizen trust. The rise of apolitical or faith-based solutions to the crisis further highlights the extent to which political contestation has delegitimised state-led efforts.

Importantly, while structural issues such as population growth, deteriorating infrastructure, and climate variability contribute to water scarcity (Makwara & Tavuyanango, 2012; Mukuhlani & Nyamupingidza, 2014), this study shows that these challenges are intensified by political interference. In an effective governance framework, such pressures would normally trigger timely investment in infrastructure and adaptive policy responses. However, in Bulawayo, political fragmentation and poor coordination among key actors, especially between central government and local authorities, have resulted in policy stagnation (Zhou & Chilunjika, 2013). This indicates that the crisis is driven less by absolute scarcity and more by governance failure. The perception of regional marginalisation, as expressed by participants, further complicates the politics of water. Beliefs that Matabeleland is intentionally sidelined in resource allocation reflect enduring grievances linked to historical and political exclusion (Thebe, 2019). Regardless of their empirical validity, these perceptions are significant because they influence public attitudes and reinforce the view that resource distribution is politically driven. Ultimately, this underscores the core argument that water provision in Bulawayo is deeply embedded within broader national struggles over power.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that the persistent water crisis in Bulawayo is not solely the result of natural scarcity, infrastructural limitations, or rapid urban expansion, but is significantly shaped by political dynamics. The findings reveal that water has been instrumentalised as a political tool by competing actors, particularly ZANU PF and CCC, resulting in a cycle of delayed interventions, unfulfilled promises, and mutual accusations. This politicisation has contributed to the stagnation of major projects such as the Gwayi-Shangani initiative, undermining the possibility of achieving a sustainable and long-term solution. The study further highlights how alleged corruption, lack of accountability, and institutional fragmentation exacerbate the crisis, while eroding public trust in both government and opposition-led structures. Residents' growing reliance on community-driven initiatives and apolitical approaches reflects a deep sense of disillusionment with political leadership. Importantly, while structural challenges such as climate variability and ageing

infrastructure cannot be ignored, they are compounded by governance failures rooted in political contestation. Ultimately, resolving Bulawayo's water crisis requires more than technical or financial interventions. It demands a deliberate depoliticisation of water governance, strengthened institutional coordination, and a shift towards prioritising public welfare over political gain. Sustainable solutions will only emerge through genuine collaboration between political actors, transparency in resource management, and meaningful inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes. Without these reforms, the crisis risks remaining a permanent feature of the city's socio-political landscape.

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