



# Tugwi Mukosi dam construction: consequences to affected local communities in Zimbabwe

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**Citation:** Matunhu J. (2021). Tugwi Mukosi dam construction: consequences to affected local communities in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Environmental Studies*, Vol. 25(1): 57-61.

## Article Information

Received 20 Mar. 2021,

Revised 15 May 2021,

Accepted 20 June 2021.

Published online

30 June 2021

**Abstract:** The inquiry focused on Tugwi Mukosi dam project displacements and relocations. The project was meant to support sugar cane projects in Chiredzi and Triangle. Unlike several other studies on the project, the current one focused on lived experiences of communities which remained as part of them was resettled at Chingwizi in Mwenezi district. The study interviewed community leaders, women, youths, government officials and business taking advantage of Tugwi Mukosi development meetings which were being held at the dam site. The study established that planning and construction of the Tugwi Mukosi dam project was not consultative enough resulting in avoidable social and economic wounds in the affected area. Some of the losses to the remaining communities is alienation of the people from their inheritance such shrines, freedom of the mighty Tugwi and Mukosi rivers, alienation from the fishes in the rivers and from indigenous fruit trees which grew along the rivers. They also experience social dislocation from relatives who were moved to Chingwizi. Adequate compensation of the affected communities was recommended to enable the remaining communities to put a closure to the pain associated with the relocation.

**Keywords:** Relocation, development, Tugwi Mukosi dam project, remaining communities.

## Introduction

National development projects are necessary, but they should cause minimum destruction to people and the environment. Globally, about fifteen million people are displaced by mega development projects yearly and that number is increasing as nations pursue development goals (Cernea, 2006). In most cases, it is the poor people who are most affected. In the current study, development is modernisation of living standards of poor economies. Development projects are (Cernea, 1996; Drydyk, 2007) the vehicles for achieving development and enhanced economic growth. However, if poorly planned, development projects infringe on people's rights to education, safety, dignity, and their right to life. Development can be located at individual, community, and national levels. At every level, projects alter the hitherto prevailing socio-economic order. At community and national levels, development projects tend to take precedence over individual priorities. In Zimbabwe, the construction of Tugwi Mukosi dam, the largest inland water body in the country, is associated with social and economic infliction on the displaced communities.

The object of this study was to document the sentiments of the communities affected by the Tugwi Mukosi dam project. The study targeted communities which remained around the dam when other people got displaced by the mega dam project. This is a departure from previous studies which focused on lived experiences of communities which are resettled elsewhere. The current inquiry focused on primary/direct displacement where people are moved from their traditional lands to make way for a development project. The inquiry established that the alienation of the people from their original social, economic, and environmental ecosystem displaced them emotional and physically.

## Research Approach

This qualitative inquiry conducted data from individuals with lived experiences of the people who were affected by the construction of the dam project. Babbie (2010) in concurrence with Neuman (2003) claims thus; (i) collection of data is done in the natural setting of social factors, (ii) actor's perspective (the insider or emic view) is emphasised, (iii) researchers are the primary instrument for data collection and analysis,

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(iv) product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive, and (v) research allows researchers to make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand. The approach enabled the researcher to make reliable conclusions on the effects of the displacement on the targeted communities.

Interviews were the main data collection tool. Interviewees (Flick, 2005; Brunt, 1997; Borg & Gall 1997; Amaratunga *et al.*, 2002) are best suited where in-depth information is required individuals' viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview. Interviews allow probing of interesting responses and observation of the non-verbal responses. Purposively selected females (3), disabled persons (2), youths (4) and traditional leaders participated in the interviews. The researcher frequented the communities around the Tugwi Mukosi dam taking advantage of planning meetings which were being organized by the Tugwi Mukosi inter-ministerial task force. The researcher camped at the dam site on 28 October 2020 to 3 November 2020 collecting data.

### Ethical Considerations

The respondents were not coerced. They were pre informed of their rights and the benefits of the inquiry and consented to participate in the study. The participants were assured that the information they supplied was to be handled confidentially and that their identities (names) were to remain anonymously. Desktop review of existing information was conducted prior to fieldwork. Such reviews helped to guide the direction of the research and cross checking the information collected in the field.

### Literature Review

Development displacement is forced dislodging of people from their habitats or land to give way to projects such as dam construction, mining, urbanization, forestry and construction of military installations, airports, and industrial plants. Gorges Dam on China's Yangtze River constructed between 1994 and 2006 displaced over 1.4 million people and Sardar Sarovar Dam in India – the largest dam in the Narmada Valley Project, displaced over 40,000 people in the 1980s and 1990s (Sahoo & Sahoo 2014). The World Bank estimate that 25 million people experienced development related problems in India during the last 50 years and that 40 million people were (Sahoo & Sahoo 2014) displaced in China in the same period. The two countries are experiencing impressive positive economic growth rates.

Official statistics on people affected by development

are usually underreported to present a good cost benefit ratio to funders and other interested parties. Poorly planned mega dam projects create refugees of an undeclared war as local authorities fail to meet the basic needs of the displaced people, such as schools, hospitals, communication networks and shelter. In most cases assetless rural poor, landless labourers and small-scale farmers are the most affected by such projects. In India, over 40 % of the displaced population (Bogumil, 2012) are already poor people.

There is a difference in assistance provided to refugees and development displaced persons. Refugees receive international protection and assistance, but development displaced persons require the state to protect them and restore their capacity to generate income. Zimbabwe is financially and economically constrained to adequately respond to the needs of communities that are affected by development projects. Although the refugees and project related problems may have similar experiences in terms of economic and social loss, the development-affected communities are not protected by international law (De Wet, 2006; Robinson, 2004). Thus, the communities understudy are not protected by international law and so they do not qualify for assistance offered to refugees even though the consequences they face may be comparably similar or worse.

Compensation policies for the affected people are usually ineffective making it possible for people to erroneously suggest that the highest priority is to avoid projects that affect communities. The suggestion is faulty in that development goals cannot be achieved without projects. What can best be advised is minimizing the negative effects projects on people and the environment.

De Wet (2006) links the policy failure to handle affected communities to corruption, undervaluing of resources, inability of planners to recognize the intricacies of the existing social and economic systems of the affected people and lack of involvement of the people in the planning process. In developing countries, women are suffering the most especially if they are alienated from productive assets like land. Without the land for agriculture, rural women lack the capacity to generate economic which force them to become more dependent on others (Terminski 2012). In such a case, the possibility of achieving the SDGs on gender parity are made difficult.

### Conceptual framework

The study was mounted on Cernea's model which identifies potential risks that are akin to displacement. Large development projects (Cernea, 1999) impoverish

communities in terms of joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity and mortality, social disintegration, food insecurity, loss of access to community property, and landlessness. Figure 1 is an illustration of the Cernea model of displacement.

The losses above may result in loss of access to schooling and the abuse of girls and women. Thus, development projects can be traumatic and dehumanizing especially for the women and the elderly. Women with no social securities are usually left insecure and psychologically weak (De Wet, 2006). The women could be paying the highest price.

People affected by large dam projects are likely to suffer the above risks in varying degrees depending on cultural norms, community resilience and the readiness of the state to cushion them. According to Kidido, Kuusaana & Gavu (2015), people living in poverty suffer most in time of displacement due to limited political and financial resources. Their challenge is bigger in cases where people are compensated with money without a well thought out mechanism for addressing their complaints.

Where land is the compensation for the displacement, the piece of land is usually inappropriate in terms of size and location (Kidido, Kuusaana & Gavu 2015). In some cases, large-scale dam projects have had little benefit to the affected people; the 20% of water allocated to communal irrigation had less benefit compared to the harm the dam construction had to the environment and people in the area.

The difficult position of the state as ‘*culprit and judge*’ in the development equation leaves the affected communities with inadequate protection and yet (De Wet, 2006) the state has an obligation to protect the human rights against the consequences of development-induced displacement.

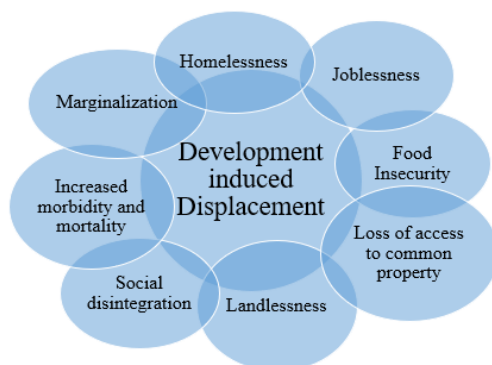


Fig. 1: Cernea Model of Displacement

## Research Findings

With reference to communities which were left behind when others were displaced to Chingwizi, marginalization, social disintegration, food insecurity

and loss of access to community property are the major risks they face. The participants noted that loss of capacity to generate income is one of the most apparent effects of the Tugwi Mukosi dam project. Loss of income from fishing and selling of wild fruits collected from the area that is now under water has influenced household food and nutrition security because the community is no longer allowed to fish unless they have permits.

The area under the water was rich in wild fruits such as *suma*, *matobwe*, *svita*, *nhunguru*, *nhengeni*, *figs*, *dzvirimombe* and others. An expert in food science confirmed that the fruits are very rich in micro-nutrients. One woman explained that she used to collect the fruits and sell them at the Ngundu Halt or deliver them to Harare where demand for the fruits was high. She would use the money she raised from her business to buy sugar, salt, and kitchen utensils.

The loss of community property in the form of schools and scenic places was a major challenge to the people with lived experiences of the topography before Tugwi Mukosi submerged it. Most respondents indicated that there are important surface landmarks which are now under water and that these landmarks characterize the people who once ‘interacted’ with them. Such landmarks included boulders, polls of water, trees, riverbeds, caves, paths and pedestals. The medicine men and women expressed hard feelings about how the dam project robbed them of medicinal plants which used to grow in the Tugwi River valley. One gentleman missed the place where he first met the woman who later became his wife. Alienation of people from their way of life (Cernea, 1999) has long-term risk of making them poorer in many ways including people who depend mostly on subsistence rain-fed cropping. Destroyed livelihoods of the people living in the periphery of the Tugwi Mukosi dam could be hard to restore because they survive on rain-fed subsistence farming.

The affected people felt that they were alienated from fishing in Tugwi and Mukosi rivers from which they obtained income and nutrition. Fish are rich in protein and are recommended for people whose medical conditions must avoid red meat. A key informant interview shared, ‘*before the mega dam was in existence, I enjoyed fishing for household nutrition. I used to sell excess fish at Ngundu business centre. Fishing made it possible for me and others to send children to school as well as getting a balanced diet. The situation has changed and the effects of this is nutrients deficiency as unlicensed fishing is criminalized. We are now regarded as poachers and not as fisherman*’. Although capital-intensive development (Drydykn, 2007) projects accelerate development, they

should avoid injustice and impoverishment of the local people. The state should take corrective action (Cernea, 2000) to protect the concerned people from other undesired consequences of development projects.

The affected people expressed concern over the severed social networks with relatives who were resettled at Chingwizi and the broken links with graves of their deceased. Concerning the deceased, the community was not happy that the graves of their forefathers were submerged under water. One of the respondents noted, *'We are no longer able to hold anniversary celebrations for our departed relatives at their graves because they are under the water . . . the rain making shrines are no longer accessible to us . . . we are now a community detached from our true selves because of the dam'*. Like refugees, affected communities experience psychological stress (Robinson, 2004) and feelings of helplessness.

The community view graves and shrines as sacred places where their ancestral spirits live looking after the living. For them tampering with the graves would bring about misfortune in life. One of the respondents associated seasonal droughts with angry spirits. An elderly woman noted thus, *'droughts, diseases and conflicts in the area are caused by the spirits which were left under water, the spirits must be appeased ...'* Graves of wise men and women are crucial for survival in these communities. Thus, in the planning and implementation of mega dam projects, it is incumbent on the authorities first to explore all feasible alternatives to avoid minimize displeasure on affected communities (Muggah, 2000). Authorities must endeavour to protect the interests of local communities.

The faith-based community living around the Tugwi Mukosi reservoir believe that the Dam dislodged them from their holy shrines and from the graves of their fellow saints. The general feeling among churches in the vicinity of the dam is that the churches were not fully involved in the planning of the project neither way they given accurate information in advance about the extent to which the dam was going to affect them. Large development projects (Cernea, 2000) must seek the free and fully informed consent of those affected as well as their active participation.

The church leader mentioned that his congregants can no longer access their sacred shrine because it is now completely under water. For him, the sacred shrine had healing powers and that since the displacement from the shrine, his church was gradually losing its healing power and that the church membership was affected as some of the followers moved to Chingwizi, where they either joined other denominations or abandoned Christianity. According to Cernea (1996), loss of links

with religious and symbolic locations diminishes community identity. Development projects should respect the rights of local communities (Muggah, 2000) otherwise the affected people will express (Robinson, 2004) feelings of distrust towards their government and the chances of living according to the "leave no-one behind" mantra of the UN SDGs will be minimised.

## Conclusion

The paper argued that large dam projects are a necessary evil for development and that the state and the local communities must share the cost of such projects. Both the state and the local communities must make sacrifices for their common good. The medium- and long-term effect of not constructing mega dams is abject poverty and severe underdevelopment. The paper focused on lived experiences of people being affected by the project with a special focus on people who remained around the dam when others were resettled at Chingwizi camp. Cernea's displacement model was used to analyse the effects of the project on the target community. The remaining community suffered nutritional, economic, social, and religious shocks. The general feeling among the people is that the harm caused by the dam should be minimized and where it is unavoidable authorities must demonstrate that such disturbances are justified by compelling and overriding public interest. The discourse concludes that the discomfort caused by the project should be mitigated through proper planning for those being displaced and those that will remain behind. Affected communities should be involved at planning, implementation and evaluation stages and early psycho-social support should be given to vulnerable women, children, youths and the elderly persons.

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