

## **Contested lands in urbanising spaces: Complex challenges and dynamics in wetlands in Harare, Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to show that contested claims, counterclaims, conflicts, and confrontation all form part of the on-going struggles between urban development, urban livelihoods, and environmental conservation in this rapidly growing city.

Wetlands cover 3% of Zimbabwe, and these have not been spared from destruction. Of the available wetlands a meagre 21% are stable while 18% are severely degraded and 61% moderately degraded. Zimbabwe is also rapidly urbanizing, sparking high demand for land for various uses in major cities, hence the scramble over wetlands. In the capital city, Harare (also regarded as a wetland city), wetlands have already been greatly reduced in extent and the remaining portions extensively degraded (Harare Wetlands Trust, 2020). Despite having specific constitutional protection for environmental rights and having specific legislation to protect wetlands in the Environmental Management Act and the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (Statutory Instrument 7 of 2007; see Mwonzora, 2021), about half of all wetlands have been lost through conversion to development. The problem is continuing with currently more than 250 sites where there are recent or on-going developments on wetlands (Harare Wetlands Trust, 2020).

This paper looks at the complex dynamics and challenges regarding wetlands in Harare, specifically examining the various claims over wetlands, competing land uses and conflict between urban developers, residents and conservationists. It brings to the fore the nuances surrounding the notion of sustainable urban development and its elusiveness in a third world city.

Encroachment onto wetlands is complex. It is linked to lack of modern housing designs such as apartments among the local populations. As such, there is continuous development of old independent housing structures, thereby exerting more pressure for land, in a context where the land is a finite resource. Related to this is the high rural to urban migration – with studies showing a 38.6% increase in rural urban migration in the year 2022 (ZimStat, 2022). This has created a dynamic of low-income migrant households informally occupying wetlands in various low-income neighbourhoods around the city. But the problem is more complex. The

gentrification and rise of gated communities have also increased encroachment on wetlands in high income neighbourhoods.

In addition, the period post 2010 also witnessed a proliferation of the so called pro-poor housing developers and cooperatives. Most of these did not follow urban housing laws. They went on to occupy any land they considered vacant. This was more evident in the southern part of the city. Concomitant to this has been the use of urban land as a source of political capital by political leaders. Although this was high among the ruling party members, this was also witnessed when opposition political parties took the reins of the city Council administration. Under these conditions, land, and wetland, is allocated to political allies as a way of vote buying. Moreover, political leaders authorise the occupation of wetlands for various developments such as shopping malls, amusement parks and casinos. This is done under the banner of development, but a close analysis reveals that this is done for political mileage at the expense of wetlands.

What is also poignant to note is that wetlands occupation and destruction has continued despite resistance by environmental conservation groups and residents. Harare Residents Trust has been locked in a fierce battle in the 'contested' Borrowdale area, a plush neighbourhood in Harare. This is just one example of the multiple battlefields that residents and land developers have fought over. The Harare Wetlands Trust and the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights have for instance, proposed to the Minister of Environment, Climate, Tourism and Hospitality Industry measures and recommendations to enhance the protection of Harare's wetlands. In November 2022, an operation named 'Operation Zero Tolerance to Environmental Crimes' was launched in Harare. This was not the first time such operations to demolish structures on wetlands had been done by the City Council. Underneath these tendencies of resistance and attempts to restore order, lies corruption, complicit and greenwashing.

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