

Climate Change Worsens Harare City's Precarious Water Situation

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Clutching a plastic container, Mazvita Musakwa, 16 trudges along a dusty pathway that leads to a community borehole in Kuwadzana.

It is 5am and the 16-year-old has woken up early to fetch water before she can prepare for school.

She has not seen water for nearly a week and this community watering hole is her only hope.

Families here can only dream of taking a cold shower as taps run dry.

At the community borehole, a fight erupts as a middle-aged man tries to jump the queue.

He is whisked away by borehole marshals who also demand bribes if anyone wants to fetch more than five buckets.

This is a daily occurrence here as Harare's water woes continue to bite the residents.

"I have to wake up around 4am daily to fetch water for daily chores. This is my daily routine which I cannot miss. My younger siblings cannot fetch water, so I have to do it myself," Mazvita tells 263Chat.

For teenage girls like Mazvita, the daily water needs have affected her school as she is always late.

At the watering hole, abuse is often rampant as the marshals demand sexual favors for water.

"This water crisis is affecting women and the girl child. Some take advantage of our desperation to propose love and when you refuse you suffer for it. This is not right, the government must intervene," Mazvita said.

As she recounts her ordeal at these boreholes, Claudina Maravanyika, 30 wades into the conversation.

She says the council should immediately restore water supplies as this is affecting the girl child.

"It has been a week without water. Other areas have water, but we have nothing, this is inconvenient as I must come to the borehole before going to work. When I get here someone demands that I fall in love with them for water, it is unfair and should stop," Maravanyika said.

Water has become a daily struggle in Zimbabwe's capital city, largely the result of a severe droughts in recent years that has drastically reduced water levels in the city's main catchment reservoirs.

Poor rains, a symptom of climate change and poor water management has wasted much of the water that remains. Two of Harare's four reservoirs are running at below capacity, with most of the water lost through leakages.

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Climate change effects are indelible at Chivero and other catchment areas, where water levels remain low despite the rains.

Although the country's meteorological department predicted a normal to above normal rainfall, rains have been elusive since mid-February.

The sporadic rains and often clear skies during a rainy season have not only been a worrisome sight for farmers but city authorities who predict more water rationing.

Water expert and University of Zimbabwe (UZ) lecturer Webster Gumindonga explained how climate change has a bearing on surface water and eventually the amount of portable water for consumption.

He said climate change has a direct impact on evapotranspiration and rainfall rates and amounts.

This has subsequent impacts on the surface runoff and groundwater resources.

Due to climate change, other areas will have too much rainfall while others will have droughts, with Zimbabwe often falling in the drought region.

“Climate change has direct impacts on temperature, evapotranspiration and rainfall rates and amounts. This has subsequent impacts on the surface runoff and groundwater resources. Depending on where you are on the earth’s surface, some areas such as in Southern Africa experience too high temperatures as well as too low rainfall compared to the long-term average values,” Gumindonga said.

As population continues to grow, with an estimated 3 million people in Harare, the city’s water needs have been on a rise, forcing council to come up with a strict water rationing programme.

To alleviate growing water problems Non-Governmental Organisations have drilled boreholes in high density suburbs but the demand for water has continued to grow.

Those without boreholes have to fetch water from unsafe water sources like shallow wells. In areas like Mbudzi, residents shocked the observers when they fetched water from nearby graves.

Harare Mayor, Jacob Mafume admitted that climate change remained a huge factor affecting water supply in Harare, but council should build more reservoirs to keep water.

“Climate change is always a factor, but the building of reservoirs helps prepare for climate change factors. We know that we are frequently having droughts and at times we have excess, we need to be able to prepare for all those,” Mafume said.

Harare is running out of water reservoirs, a situation that has exacerbated the water situation.

Council has been flirting with the idea of building a canal from the Eastern Highlands to avoid losing water to Mozambique.

“We need to invest in treatment plants. The treatment plant is old and antiquated. Morton Jeffrey would be surprised that we are still using his museum piece, so we need to improve on that. We need to improve the network that carries the water. It is affected by old pipes, lack of electricity,” Mafume said.