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Corruption in Disaster Risk Management: Governance Failures, Humanitarian Accountability and Lessons for Zimbabwe from the SADC Region

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ABSTRACT

Disaster risk management (DRM) is commonly presented as a technical field concerned with early warning, preparedness, emergency response and recovery. Yet the effectiveness of these functions is fundamentally shaped by governance. This paper critically examines how corruption, political patronage, weak accountability and institutional fragmentation influence DRM, with particular emphasis on Zimbabwe and comparative evidence from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The study adopts a qualitative conceptual-review design informed by principal-agent theory, institutional theory and the social vulnerability perspective. It synthesises peer-reviewed literature, regional strategies, government policies and humanitarian accountability guidance. The review finds that corruption may occur throughout the disaster cycle through manipulated risk assessments, politically selective beneficiary registration, opaque emergency procurement, diversion of relief supplies, inflated reconstruction contracts, favouritism and the exclusion of marginalised communities. Across SADC, recurring climate shocks interact with fiscal constraints, centralised institutions, uneven local capacity and limited public disclosure. Zimbabwe displays many of these regional vulnerabilities, including fragmented coordination, inadequate preparedness, limited community participation and weak systems for tracing resources from procurement to final beneficiaries. The paper proposes an integrated Disaster Integrity and Accountability Framework built around transparent targeting, open emergency contracting, end-to-end digital tracking, independent assurance, community verification and enforceable sanctions. It concludes that disaster resilience cannot be achieved through technical capacity alone. Effective DRM in Zimbabwe requires political neutrality, credible institutions and accountability mechanisms embedded across prevention, preparedness, response, recovery and reconstruction.

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Received: July 31, 2026; **Accepted:** August 06, 2026; **Published:** August 15, 2026

Keywords: Corruption, Disaster Risk Management, Humanitarian Accountability, SADC, Zimbabwe, Disaster Governance, Emergency Procurement, Community Participation

Introduction

Southern Africa has become increasingly exposed to droughts, floods, tropical cyclones, disease outbreaks and food-security emergencies. These hazards are not automatically disasters; they become disastrous where populations are exposed, livelihoods are fragile and institutions lack the capacity or integrity to anticipate and manage risk. Disaster risk management therefore extends beyond meteorological forecasting and emergency logistics. It encompasses the political and administrative systems through which risks are identified, resources are allocated, beneficiaries are selected and public officials are held answerable. Where these systems are weakened by corruption, emergency resources may fail to reach the people for whom they were intended, while recovery programmes may reproduce the inequalities that created vulnerability in the first place [1-3].

Corruption in DRM may be understood as the abuse of entrusted authority, information, resources or discretion for private, political or organisational advantage during the prevention, preparedness,

response, recovery and reconstruction phases. Its manifestations extend beyond direct theft. They include the manipulation of vulnerability assessments, political interference in beneficiary selection, bribery for access to assistance, procurement collusion, contract inflation, substitution of relief goods, favouritism in recruitment and contracting, and diversion of reconstruction materials. Humanitarian operations are particularly vulnerable because urgency can weaken ordinary procurement controls, affected citizens may lack information, and large volumes of goods and finance move rapidly through multiple institutions [4,6].

The consequences of such corruption are severe. It can increase mortality by delaying rescue and medical support, worsen food insecurity through diversion of supplies, reduce the quality of reconstructed infrastructure and destroy trust between communities and state institutions. Corruption can also distort future risk by encouraging settlement in unsafe areas, weakening enforcement of building standards and directing resilience investment towards politically connected localities rather than objectively vulnerable communities. It is therefore both a cause and a multiplier of disaster vulnerability. Empirical literature on state capacity consistently associates better government quality with reduced disaster losses, while corruption increases vulnerability and weakens the public

goods required for prevention and recovery [7,8].

Zimbabwe provides a significant context for examining this relationship. The country has experienced recurrent droughts, floods and tropical cyclones, including the severe effects of Cyclone Idai. These events have exposed weaknesses in early warning, coordination, local preparedness, information management and recovery planning. Zimbabwe also faces fiscal pressure, food insecurity, infrastructure deficits and socio-economic inequality, all of which raise the value and scarcity of emergency assistance. Under such conditions, opaque allocation systems and political discretion can translate into unequal access to life-saving resources [9,11].

Although Zimbabwean DRM scholarship has grown, much of it concentrates on preparedness, climate vulnerability, indigenous knowledge, community resilience and institutional coordination. Corruption and integrity are often treated as peripheral governance issues rather than as central determinants of disaster outcomes. This paper addresses that analytical gap by integrating disaster governance and anti-corruption perspectives. It also provides a regional empirical synthesis of selected SADC countries to demonstrate that Zimbabwe's challenges are part of broader patterns, while recognising important institutional differences across member states.

The paper is organised into nine sections. Following this introduction, it states the problem and objectives, outlines the conceptual foundations and methodology, reviews the literature on corruption across the disaster cycle, presents comparative empirical evidence from SADC, examines the Zimbabwean context, proposes an integrated framework, and concludes with policy recommendations.

Problem Statement and Objectives

Zimbabwe's disaster governance system is expected to protect lives, livelihoods and public assets through risk reduction, preparedness, coordinated response and resilient recovery. However, the system operates in an environment characterised by limited resources, fragmented institutional mandates, centralised decision-making and uneven subnational capacity. These weaknesses create accountability gaps between the institutions that control disaster resources and the citizens who bear disaster losses. During emergencies, accelerated procurement and discretionary beneficiary selection may further reduce transparency. Where expenditure, stocks, contracts and beneficiary decisions are not publicly traceable, corruption can be difficult to detect and may be misclassified as logistical failure, administrative delay or general resource scarcity.

The central problem is therefore not merely whether Zimbabwe possesses DRM laws, plans and institutions, but whether its governance arrangements can prevent political capture, diversion and misuse of disaster resources. Existing studies provide valuable insights into vulnerability and institutional performance, yet there remains insufficient synthesis of how corruption risks emerge across the entire disaster cycle and how regional SADC experience can guide reforms. Without an integrated integrity framework, technical investments in early-warning systems, humanitarian logistics and reconstruction may produce limited resilience gains.

The paper pursues four objectives: to analyse the forms and drivers of corruption across the DRM cycle; to synthesise empirical and policy evidence from selected SADC countries; to evaluate the

implications of regional findings for Zimbabwe; and to propose an institutional framework for strengthening transparency, accountability and community oversight in Zimbabwean DRM.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Principal-agent theory explains corruption as a consequence of information asymmetry and divergent interests between citizens as principals and public officials, contractors or humanitarian agents as agents. Disaster environments intensify this problem because officials possess specialised information about hazards, beneficiary lists, procurement needs and stock movements that affected citizens cannot easily verify. Emergency discretion may be necessary, but it also permits agents to manipulate decisions for political or private benefit. Monitoring systems, disclosure, separation of duties and credible sanctions are therefore necessary to align agents' behaviour with public objectives [12].

Institutional theory directs attention to formal rules, organisational norms and patterns of enforcement. A country may adopt sophisticated DRM policies while actual implementation is shaped by informal patronage, political interference and weak compliance cultures. Institutions become effective not merely when rules exist, but when roles are clear, resources are adequate and violations carry predictable consequences. This perspective is relevant to Zimbabwe, where the gap between policy design and operational implementation has repeatedly been identified in disaster governance literature [13,14].

The social vulnerability perspective argues that disaster impacts are distributed according to pre-existing inequalities. Poverty, gender, disability, rural isolation, insecure housing and weak political voice shape exposure and recovery capacity. Corruption magnifies these inequalities when politically connected or economically powerful groups capture assistance. Conversely, transparent community participation can reveal local needs and reduce exclusion. Zimbabwean studies show that socio-economic inequality and limited community involvement are central determinants of disaster vulnerability [15,16].

Together, the three perspectives support an integrated proposition: corruption becomes likely when public agents hold wide discretion, institutions lack effective controls and vulnerable communities lack information or voice. Integrity reforms must therefore combine administrative monitoring, institutional enforcement and participatory accountability.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative conceptual-review design under a pragmatic orientation. A conceptual review was appropriate because the purpose was to integrate fragmented evidence on corruption, humanitarian accountability and disaster governance rather than to estimate a single causal effect. The review examined the references supplied for the study together with regional policy instruments and selected authoritative literature on humanitarian corruption and SADC disaster governance.

Sources were organised into four categories: theoretical and methodological literature; global studies on corruption in humanitarian operations and reconstruction; African and SADC governance studies; and Zimbabwe-specific literature on disaster vulnerability, institutional performance, community participation, information systems and climate-related emergencies. Particular attention was paid to evidence that identified accountability problems, discretionary resource allocation, procurement risks,

political interference, information asymmetry and exclusion of vulnerable groups.

The analysis applied thematic synthesis. Findings were coded under five themes: corruption risks across the disaster cycle; institutional and legal weaknesses; emergency procurement and resource diversion; community participation and social accountability; and digital information and traceability. A comparative SADC matrix was then developed for Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and Botswana. These cases were selected because they demonstrate different combinations of recurrent hazards, governance capacity and regional relevance. The analysis does not claim that all observed DRM failures result from corruption. Instead, it distinguishes demonstrated corruption risks from broader governance weaknesses that create opportunities for corruption.

Corruption Across the Disaster Risk Management Cycle

Corruption risks begin before a disaster occurs. Risk assessments, land-use plans and infrastructure standards determine which communities receive protection and where development is permitted. Officials may manipulate zoning decisions, overlook unsafe construction or direct mitigation projects towards politically favoured areas. Corruption in prevention is especially damaging because it remains invisible until a hazard exposes weak infrastructure or unplanned settlements. Where building inspections are compromised, schools, bridges, clinics and shelters may fail precisely when they are most needed.

Preparedness creates additional integrity risks through stockpiling, training, procurement and early-warning investments. Equipment may be purchased at inflated prices, stored goods can expire or disappear, and preparedness budgets may be redirected to more politically visible activities. Weak inventory management makes it difficult to determine whether shortages during an emergency were caused by inadequate funding or previous diversion. Digital stock registers, periodic audits and publicly disclosed preparedness benchmarks can reduce these risks.

The response phase is often the most visible point of corruption. Rapid procurement, scarce supplies and humanitarian urgency increase discretion. Beneficiary lists may include ghost recipients or exclude households without political connections. Relief workers or local intermediaries may demand payments, labour, political loyalty or sexual favours in exchange for assistance. Goods can be diverted during transport, warehousing or distribution. Cash-transfer programmes also face identity fraud, duplicate payments and capture by intermediaries unless they are supported by secure registries and accessible grievance systems [4,6].

Recovery and reconstruction involve even larger financial flows and prolonged contracting. identify bribery, collusion, contract inflation, substandard work and regulatory capture as recurring risks in post-disaster construction. A contractor may reduce material quality while certifying full completion, or officials may favour firms connected to political elites. The resulting infrastructure remains vulnerable to future hazards, converting corruption into recurrent physical risk [5].

Political corruption cuts across all phases. Disaster declarations may be delayed or accelerated for political reasons, while relief distribution may be used to reward supporters and punish opposition communities. Political interference also weakens professional judgement by substituting partisan priorities for objective risk criteria. Asuelime (2021) and broader African

governance literature associate patronage with distorted allocation and weak institutional accountability. In a DRM setting, the human cost of such distortion is immediate because excluded households may face hunger, displacement or preventable death.

Information corruption is another cross-cutting problem. Authorities may underreport losses, conceal expenditure, exaggerate beneficiary numbers or withhold contract details. Poor information can also be unintentionally produced by fragmented systems, but persistent opacity prevents citizens from distinguishing administrative weakness from deliberate manipulation. Strong knowledge management and interoperable digital systems are therefore accountability tools as well as operational tools [17,18].

The literature also warns against viewing digitalisation as an automatic solution. Biometric systems may exclude people lacking documentation, centralised databases may be manipulated by privileged administrators, and surveillance risks may undermine trust. Technology must therefore be accompanied by data protection, independent audits, human appeal procedures and offline access for remote communities.

Emergency procurement deserves particular attention because ordinary competitive procedures are frequently shortened or suspended during crises. Such flexibility may be operationally justified when delay threatens lives, but it can also permit single-source awards, weak price testing and inadequate supplier due diligence. Corruption risk rises where the same official identifies the need, selects the supplier, certifies delivery and authorises payment. Effective emergency systems therefore separate these functions while retaining rapid approval. They also publish procurement information quickly enough for scrutiny to influence ongoing operations rather than waiting for annual reports.

The integrity of disaster financing is equally important. Disaster funds may combine national budget appropriations, donor grants, insurance payouts and in-kind contributions. When these streams are recorded in separate systems, neither oversight institutions nor communities can determine the total resources available for a particular emergency. Fragmentation can conceal double funding, substitution of donor resources for approved public expenditure, or the diversion of unrestricted funds. A consolidated financing statement should therefore reconcile commitments, receipts, expenditure and outstanding obligations by programme and location.

Humanitarian logistics involves numerous transfer points at which goods can be lost or substituted. Commodities move from suppliers to central warehouses, district stores, transporters, distribution points and households. Paper-based records can be altered, while aggregate delivery reports may hide shortages at specific sites. End-to-end traceability requires matching purchase orders, goods-received notes, warehouse issues, vehicle manifests and signed or digitally confirmed beneficiary receipts. Variances should trigger immediate investigation rather than being absorbed as normal emergency loss.

Corruption also affects the production and use of disaster knowledge. Officials or contractors may overstate damage to justify inflated budgets, understate losses to avoid political embarrassment, or prioritise data from accessible areas while neglecting remote settlements. Inaccurate data distorts both immediate assistance and long-term investment. Independent damage assessments, transparent methodologies and community

validation are therefore essential. Open data should be sufficiently disaggregated to reveal geographic and social inequalities without exposing affected persons to privacy or security risks.

The recruitment and deployment of emergency personnel can also be captured. Temporary jobs, allowances, fuel allocations and travel benefits may be distributed through patronage rather than competence. This weakens response quality and diverts scarce funds. Clear deployment criteria, verified attendance, conflict-of-interest declarations and post-operation reconciliation of allowances and fuel are practical integrity controls. Professional rosters should be created before disasters and updated through merit-based training and certification.

Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment constitute forms of corruption where entrusted power over assistance is exchanged for sexual access. Women, girls, displaced persons and undocumented migrants may be particularly vulnerable when complaints systems are inaccessible or controlled by the same local actors who distribute aid. Safeguards must include confidential reporting, survivor-centred referral pathways, gender-balanced distribution teams and sanctions that apply across government, non-governmental organisations and contractors.

The recovery phase presents risks associated with compensation and livelihood support. Damage assessments may favour

households able to influence officials, while tenants, informal traders and persons without formal property records can be excluded. Transparent compensation schedules and multiple forms of proof are necessary in contexts where formal documentation is limited. Appeals should be decided by bodies independent of the original assessment team, and payment data should be reconciled with verified claims.

Reconstruction governance must also address the long-time horizon of major projects. Public attention often declines after the immediate emergency, while contracts continue for years. This creates opportunities for variation orders, cost escalation and incomplete works. Project dashboards, milestone-based payments, independent engineering inspections and community monitoring can preserve accountability. Completed infrastructure should be tested against resilience standards rather than merely certified as physically present.

Community participation is among the most important counterweights to corruption. Residents can validate beneficiary lists, confirm whether supplies arrived, identify politically motivated exclusion and monitor reconstruction quality. Indigenous knowledge also improves the legitimacy and relevance of preparedness plans. However, participation must have decision-making power rather than being reduced to consultation after key choices have been made [19-21].

Table 1: Corruption Risks and Controls Across the Disaster Cycle

DRM phase	Illustrative corruption risks	Likely consequences	Priority controls
Prevention and mitigation	Zoning manipulation; bribed inspections; politically selective infrastructure	Unsafe settlement, weak structures and unequal protection	Publish risk maps; rotate inspectors; independent engineering review
Preparedness	Inflated equipment purchases; missing stocks; ghost training	Shortages, delayed response and wasted budgets	Digital inventory; periodic stock audits; prequalified suppliers
Emergency response	Political targeting; diversion; extortion; duplicate beneficiaries	Exclusion, hunger, mortality and distrust	Transparent eligibility; tracked consignments; grievance channels
Recovery	Favouritism in compensation; fraudulent damage claims	Unequal restoration of livelihoods and prolonged displacement	Verified claims; public criteria; independent appeals
Reconstruction	Collusion; inflated contracts; substandard work	Unsafe infrastructure and repeated losses	Open contracting; beneficial ownership; technical certification

Empirical Analysis of the SADC Region

The SADC region combines high exposure to climate shocks with substantial differences in state capacity, decentralisation, fiscal space and accountability. The SADC Disaster Risk Management Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2030 calls for stronger governance, knowledge management, regional coordination and institutional capacity, including the role of the SADC Humanitarian and Emergency Operations Centre. The strategy acknowledges that transboundary hazards require coordinated systems rather than isolated national responses (SADC, 2022).

Empirical analysis in this paper refers to a structured synthesis of published country studies, regional assessments and documented disaster experiences. It does not represent new survey data. Across the selected countries, the strongest recurring pattern is that disaster losses are intensified where national coordination is centralised but local implementation capacity is weak. A second pattern is limited traceability of emergency procurement and relief distribution. A third is the marginalisation of communities in decisions about targeting, relocation and reconstruction. These conditions do not prove corruption in every case, but they create opportunity structures in which corruption is difficult to detect and sanction.

South Africa has a comparatively developed legal and institutional DRM architecture, including national, provincial and municipal responsibilities. However, uneven municipal capacity, procurement controversies and broader public-sector corruption risks affect implementation. The country’s experience demonstrates that formal sophistication does not guarantee integrity where local institutions lack technical capacity or where emergency procurement is insufficiently transparent. The governance lesson for Zimbabwe is that legal reform must be accompanied by implementation capacity, open contracting and independent oversight.

Mozambique is repeatedly affected by cyclones and floods, including Cyclones Idai and Kenneth. Large-scale humanitarian and reconstruction programmes involve government agencies, donors, international organisations and local communities. The multiplicity of actors can mobilise resources, but it can also fragment accountability. Risks include unclear responsibility for beneficiary selection, duplication of assistance, contractor opacity and exclusion of remote communities. Mozambique illustrates the need for a single, auditable coordination platform that links donor commitments, government allocations, stocks and beneficiary outcomes.

Malawi faces recurrent floods, droughts, cyclones and food-security crises. Local government structures and community committees play important roles, but limited fiscal and logistical capacity constrains implementation. Scarcity increases the power of intermediaries who control access to food, shelter and agricultural support. The Malawian experience underscores the need to publish eligibility criteria and establish grievance mechanisms that are accessible outside political and traditional authority structures.

Zambia faces drought, floods and food-security pressures, with responsibilities distributed across national and subnational institutions. As in other SADC countries, challenges include financing gaps, incomplete risk information and uneven local preparedness. The implication for integrity is that fragmented information can conceal leakage and make it difficult to reconcile procurement, stock and distribution records. Zambia's developing digital public infrastructure offers potential lessons for linking social protection registries with disaster response, provided inclusion and data protection safeguards are maintained.

Botswana has comparatively stronger public institutions and lower perceived corruption than many regional peers, but it remains exposed to drought, water scarcity and climate stress. Its experience suggests that institutional credibility, predictable procedures and fiscal discipline can improve preparedness. Nevertheless, a relatively strong national governance profile does not remove local exclusion risks. Zimbabwe can learn from Botswana's emphasis on administrative systems while ensuring more participatory community monitoring.

Zimbabwe experiences many of the regional problems simultaneously: recurrent climate hazards, fiscal scarcity, centralised coordination, uneven district capacity, information fragmentation and politically contested resource allocation. Studies following Cyclone Idai identify weaknesses in preparedness, early warning and coordination, while community-based research stresses inadequate participation and the importance of indigenous knowledge. The combined evidence indicates that Zimbabwe's reform priority should be an integrated accountability system rather than additional institutions with overlapping mandates.

Regional institutions have increasingly recognised the importance of anticipatory governance. The SADC strategy promotes risk knowledge, institutional strengthening and regional coordination, while UNDRR assessments emphasise disaster-loss databases and risk-informed planning. These reforms can also strengthen integrity because decisions based on documented risk reduce the space for politically selective allocation. However, regional standards require common indicators and comparable reporting if

member states are to learn from each other and identify unusual expenditure or delivery patterns.

COVID-19 provided a non-climatic but highly relevant regional stress test. Across Southern Africa, emergency health procurement raised concerns about inflated prices, politically connected suppliers, beneficial ownership and limited disclosure. The experience demonstrated that emergency exceptions can become channels for corruption when transparency follows rather than accompanies expenditure. DRM systems should absorb these lessons by making real-time publication, conflict-of-interest controls and supplier verification standard features of all declared emergencies.

The selected cases also demonstrate the importance of social protection infrastructure. Countries with updated registries and reliable payment systems can deliver cash or assistance more rapidly, but registries may omit informal workers, migrants and households whose circumstances changed after a shock. Regional experience therefore supports dynamic registration, community verification and appeal processes. Zimbabwe should avoid treating a digital record as conclusive proof of vulnerability or eligibility.

Cross-border disasters create further accountability challenges. Cyclones, droughts, epidemics and river floods may affect several SADC states simultaneously, prompting regional stock movements and international assistance. Without harmonised documentation, a consignment can be recorded differently by the donor, receiving government and local distributor. SADC could develop standard consignment identifiers, customs protocols and post-operation reconciliation procedures for regional humanitarian movements.

Donor coordination is another empirical concern. Multiple partners may fund similar sectors or geographic areas while using different reporting systems. This can overload local authorities and produce gaps elsewhere. A public, government-led but independently auditable platform should map who is financing what, where and for whom. Such coordination should not suppress civil-society scrutiny; rather, it should enable verification of whether announced commitments translated into delivered assistance.

Overall, the SADC evidence supports a governance continuum rather than a simple division between strong and weak states. Every country faces integrity risks, but the form of risk varies with institutional capacity, fiscal systems, political competition and hazard profile. Regional learning should therefore focus on functions - procurement, targeting, logistics, complaints and reconstruction assurance - rather than assuming that one national model can be transferred unchanged to Zimbabwe.

Table 2: Comparative Empirical Synthesis of Selected Sadc Countries

Country	Dominant hazards	Governance and integrity findings	Regional lesson	Implication for Zimbabwe
South Africa	Floods, drought, wildfire, disease outbreaks	Advanced statutory framework but uneven municipal capacity and emergency-procurement risk	Formal institutions require local implementation capacity, open contracting and independent review.	Relevant model for legal clarity, but Zimbabwe must avoid unfunded local mandates.
Mozambique	Cyclones, floods, drought	Multiple humanitarian actors, fragmented accountability and large reconstruction flows	Use unified coordination, donor mapping, beneficiary traceability and contractor disclosure.	Highly relevant to cyclone response and transboundary humanitarian coordination.
Malawi	Cyclones, floods, drought, food insecurity	Scarce resources increase intermediary power; community structures are important but uneven	Publish eligibility rules, strengthen grievance channels and monitor local gatekeepers.	Applicable to Zimbabwean food-relief and rural beneficiary systems.
Zambia	Drought, floods, food-security shocks	Financing gaps, incomplete risk data and uneven subnational preparedness	Integrate social registries, inventories and disaster data with inclusion safeguards.	Supports Zimbabwean development of interoperable digital systems.
Botswana	Drought, water scarcity, climate stress	Stronger administrative credibility and fiscal discipline, but local exclusion remains possible	Predictable rules and administrative controls improve preparedness.	Offers lessons on procedural discipline and institutional credibility.
Zimbabwe	Cyclones, drought, floods, food insecurity	Centralised coordination, fragmented information, weak district capacity and political-allocation risks	Embed integrity controls throughout the DRM cycle and strengthen community verification.	Primary application: integrated prevention, tracking, oversight and sanctions.

The comparative matrix indicates that corruption risks are not determined by hazard exposure alone. They are mediated by administrative capacity, the transparency of emergency finance, local participation and the quality of information systems. South Africa and Botswana demonstrate that stronger formal institutions can reduce but not eliminate integrity risks. Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe show how recurrent emergencies, financing constraints and dispersed actors can complicate accountability. The regional implication is that SADC should treat integrity as an operational component of preparedness rather than solely as a national law-enforcement issue.

Table 3: Cross-Country Empirical Patterns and Policy Implications

Empirical pattern	Countries where prominent	Integrity consequence	Recommended response
Centralised coordination with weak local capacity	Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique	Delayed delivery, unclear responsibility and local dependence	Delegate operational authority with standardised reporting and audits
Opaque or accelerated emergency procurement	Region-wide risk; especially large-scale response settings	Inflated prices, favouritism and poor-quality goods	Open emergency contracting and prequalified suppliers
Fragmented beneficiary and stock information	Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia	Duplication, exclusion and inability to reconcile deliveries	Interoperable registries and end-to-end tracking
Limited community influence	Across selected cases	Elite capture and weak legitimacy	Community validation, social audits and accessible appeals
Uneven institutional capability	All cases at different levels	Policy-implementation gap	Capacity investment linked to integrity performance indicators

Zimbabwean Context and Critical Discussion

Zimbabwe's formal DRM framework is anchored in national policy and civil-protection arrangements that assign coordinating responsibilities to central government and establish subnational structures. The policy direction recognises preparedness, prevention and coordinated response. However, implementation literature identifies a persistent imbalance between central authority and local capacity. Districts and communities are closest to hazards but frequently depend on centrally controlled resources, technical expertise and approvals. This structure widens information asymmetry and can delay action while making local actors dependent on discretionary decisions [22,23].

Cyclone Idai demonstrated the consequences of institutional fragmentation. Research records limitations in early warning, evacuation preparedness, transport, communication and coordination. These failures cannot automatically be labelled corruption, but they reveal control weaknesses. When responsibilities are unclear and information systems are disconnected, it becomes difficult to identify who authorised expenditure, where goods were delivered and whether delays arose from capacity constraints or misconduct [24]. Food insecurity creates a particularly serious integrity risk. Recurrent drought and economic vulnerability increase dependence on

public and humanitarian assistance. Relief food is both essential and politically valuable. Where beneficiary criteria are unclear or lists are controlled by local elites, assistance can become an instrument of patronage. Zimbabwe should therefore separate political structures from technical targeting decisions and ensure that community validation includes independent civil-society and vulnerable-group representation [25].

Climate-finance and adaptation programmes also require stronger integrity safeguards. Zimbabwe needs substantial investment in irrigation, water systems, resilient infrastructure, early warning and livelihood diversification. These projects involve procurement, land decisions and contractor management. Without beneficial-ownership disclosure, engineering verification and public performance reporting, resilience finance can be captured by firms or officials without producing durable public assets [26].

The social distribution of corruption harms is unequal. Women may face gender-based exploitation in accessing aid; persons with disabilities may be omitted from inaccessible registration systems; rural households may lack information about appeal procedures; and politically marginalised communities may fear retaliation. An integrity strategy must therefore be gender-responsive and rights-based. It should measure not only total quantities distributed but also who received assistance, who was excluded and whether assistance matched differentiated needs.

Public trust is both an outcome and an operational resource. Communities that distrust institutions may withhold information, ignore evacuation instructions or avoid complaint mechanisms. Conversely, transparent reporting and visible enforcement can strengthen cooperation. Zimbabwe's disaster institutions should publish timely information on risk, finance, contracts, distribution and complaints. Transparency must be routine rather than activated only after allegations arise [8].

ZACC has a potentially important preventive role. Anti-corruption involvement should not begin only after suspected theft. Corruption-risk assessments can be conducted before disasters, emergency procurement systems can be reviewed, and integrity officers can be embedded in major response programmes. ZACC can also coordinate with internal auditors, the Auditor-General, Parliament, civil society and humanitarian organisations to develop common red flags and reporting protocols.

The ultimate policy challenge is to reconcile speed with accountability. Emergency response requires rapid decision-making, but speed does not require secrecy. Pre-approved supplier frameworks, standard emergency prices, electronic approvals and real-time publication can allow both rapid action and traceability. The relevant distinction is not between bureaucracy and flexibility, but between controlled flexibility and unrecorded discretion.

Discussion of the Regional Evidence

The regional comparison reveals that corruption risk in DRM is primarily a systems problem rather than a collection of isolated ethical failures. Individual misconduct becomes more likely when emergency procedures concentrate discretion, information is dispersed across agencies and oversight is delayed until after funds have been spent. This finding is consistent with principal-agent theory: the distance between affected citizens and decision-makers allows agents to act without timely verification. It also supports institutional theory because formal policies have limited effect where operational routines, enforcement and organisational incentives do not reinforce them.

A notable regional pattern is the tension between central coordination and local responsiveness. Centralisation can support national standards and resource pooling, yet excessive dependence on central authorisation delays action and weakens local ownership. Decentralisation, however, can reproduce patronage at district or community level if local institutions are not transparent. Zimbabwe should therefore pursue accountable decentralisation: districts require delegated authority, predictable resources and trained personnel, while national systems should retain common reporting, audit and disclosure requirements.

The comparison also shows that scarcity is not merely a financial constraint; it changes the political economy of assistance. When food, shelter, fuel, transport and compensation are insufficient, officials and intermediaries gain power to determine who receives support. Scarcity can therefore intensify bribery, patronage and social exclusion. Transparent prioritisation cannot eliminate shortages, but it can ensure that decisions are evidence-based, publicly explained and open to appeal. This is particularly important in Zimbabwe, where recurrent drought and food insecurity make relief allocation a repeated governance function rather than an exceptional activity.

The evidence further suggests that public participation is most effective when communities possess information and enforceable rights. Consultation without disclosure does not allow residents to verify stocks, expenditure or beneficiary decisions. Similarly, a complaint line has limited value if complainants fear retaliation or never receive feedback. Social accountability should therefore combine accessible information, independent facilitation, protection of complainants and mandatory institutional response. Community monitoring must also avoid capture by local elites through inclusive membership and rotation.

Digital systems emerge as a necessary but insufficient reform. Interoperable registries, electronic procurement and geo-tagged deliveries can improve traceability, yet they may also centralise control and exclude people without documentation or connectivity. Zimbabwe should adopt a hybrid accountability model in which digital records are supported by paper contingencies, human verification and independent system audits. Technology should reduce information asymmetry without replacing due process.

Finally, the SADC evidence indicates that regional cooperation can create integrity benefits beyond operational coordination. Shared procurement benchmarks can expose abnormal prices, regional supplier databases can identify debarred or politically connected firms, and common reporting templates can make cross-country comparison possible. Zimbabwe should advocate for an integrity protocol within SADC DRM cooperation, linking the work of disaster agencies, supreme audit institutions and anti-corruption bodies.

Proposed Disaster Integrity and Accountability Framework

This paper proposes a Disaster Integrity and Accountability Framework for Zimbabwe. The framework embeds anti-corruption controls across five operational pillars: transparent risk governance, accountable resource mobilisation, traceable delivery, participatory oversight and enforceable assurance. It is designed to complement rather than replace existing DRM institutions.

The first pillar, transparent risk governance, requires publication of hazard assessments, vulnerability criteria, preparedness benchmarks and institutional responsibilities. Decisions about relocation, infrastructure protection and beneficiary priority should be supported by documented evidence. Conflicts of interest should

be declared by officials, committee members and contractors.

The second pillar, accountable resource mobilisation, applies open-contracting principles to emergency procurement. Government should maintain prequalified supplier panels, benchmark prices, disclose contract awards and publish beneficial ownership information. Any departure from competitive procedures should be justified in writing and reviewed after the emergency.

The third pillar, traceable delivery, links procurement records, warehouse inventories, transport documentation and beneficiary receipts. Each consignment should have a digital or auditable identifier, while geo-tagged delivery confirmation should be used where feasible. Cash transfers should be reconciled against verified registries, with duplicate detection and human appeal channels.

The fourth pillar, participatory oversight, establishes inclusive community monitoring committees that validate beneficiary lists, observe distributions and report irregularities. Membership should include women, youth, persons with disabilities, traditional structures, civil society and technical officials. Participation must include access to information and the power to trigger review.

The fifth pillar, enforceable assurance, combines concurrent internal audit, external audit, parliamentary oversight, ZACC corruption-risk review and independent engineering verification for reconstruction. Findings and corrective actions should be published. Whistle-blowers and complainants should be protected, and sanctions should apply consistently to political actors, officials, suppliers and intermediaries.

The framework should be supported by a national disaster-information platform. The platform would integrate hazard information, budgets, donor commitments, procurement, stocks, beneficiary statistics and project progress. Access controls and independent system audits would be necessary to prevent digital manipulation. Aggregate public dashboards should protect personal information while enabling citizens to compare commitments with delivery.

Implementation should be phased. The first phase would map corruption risks and revise emergency procedures. The second would pilot open contracting and digital tracking in high-risk provinces. The third would integrate community verification and independent assurance nationally. Performance indicators should include contract publication rates, stock reconciliation differences, complaint resolution time, beneficiary-exclusion rates and the proportion of reconstruction projects independently certified [27-32].

Policy Recommendations

Zimbabwe should enact explicit disaster-integrity provisions within its DRM legislation and operational manuals. The law should prohibit political discrimination, diversion, fraudulent registration, extortion and conflict-of-interest contracting in disaster programmes. Institutional responsibilities for investigation and sanction should be clearly allocated.

Emergency procurement should be transparent by default. Procuring entities should publish supplier names, contract values, unit prices, beneficial owners, delivery schedules and reasons for non-competitive awards. Framework contracts should be established before emergencies, reducing the need for improvised supplier selection.

A unified disaster-resource tracking system should connect Treasury releases, donor funding, procurement, warehouses, transport and final distribution. Offline-compatible tools should

be available for remote districts, and all systems should preserve auditable logs.

Beneficiary selection should be based on publicly available vulnerability criteria and verified by inclusive local committees. Political office-bearers should not control technical eligibility decisions. Independent appeal mechanisms should be available through toll-free lines, mobile platforms and physical help desks.

Concurrent assurance should replace delayed accountability. Internal auditors, ZACC and programme monitors should review high-value transactions and distributions during the response, while the Auditor-General should conduct rapid post-emergency audits. Reconstruction projects should undergo independent technical certification.

Zimbabwe should strengthen district-level capacity through predictable budgets, training, pre-positioned stocks and clear delegated authority. Decentralisation must be matched with standard reporting and oversight to avoid transferring corruption risks to local elites.

Regional cooperation through SADC should include common emergency-procurement standards, shared supplier-risk information, regional stock tracking and joint reviews of cross-border humanitarian operations. The SADC Humanitarian and Emergency Operations Centre can support standardised data and accountability protocols.

Finally, DRM performance should be evaluated through equity and trust indicators, not only aggregate delivery totals. Government should report the distribution of assistance by geography, gender, disability and vulnerability category, while conducting periodic public-trust surveys and publishing responses to complaints.

Limitations and Future Research

The paper is limited by its conceptual-review design and reliance on published literature and policy documents. Corruption is inherently difficult to observe because participants may conceal behaviour, administrative records may be incomplete and governance failures are not always evidence of deliberate misconduct. The regional comparison therefore identifies corruption risks and institutional opportunity structures rather than estimating the prevalence or monetary value of corruption in each country.

Future research should test the proposed framework through mixed methods in Zimbabwe. Household surveys could measure experiences of exclusion, unofficial payments and confidence in complaint systems. Interviews with civil-protection officials, local authorities, humanitarian organisations, traditional leaders and oversight institutions could explain how discretion is exercised. Procurement and stock data could be analysed for red flags such as repeated single-source awards, price outliers, contract splitting, unexplained inventory losses and concentration of awards among connected suppliers.

Longitudinal research is also required to examine whether integrity reforms improve disaster outcomes. Studies could compare districts that implement open contracting, digital tracking and community verification with districts using conventional arrangements. Relevant outcomes would include delivery time, reconciliation differences, complaint resolution, beneficiary inclusion, public trust and the durability of reconstructed infrastructure. Such evidence would move the debate from normative recommendations towards measurable institutional effectiveness.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that corruption is not an external problem added to disaster risk management; it is a mechanism through which hazards are transformed into deeper and more unequal disasters. It can weaken prevention, distort preparedness, capture emergency assistance and undermine reconstruction. The regional evidence from SADC demonstrates that recurrent climate shocks interact with centralised systems, limited local capacity, fiscal scarcity and fragmented information. These conditions create substantial integrity risks even where formal policies are in place.

Zimbabwe's experience reflects the regional pattern but also offers clear reform opportunities. Community knowledge, digital tools, established oversight institutions and emerging regional coordination can be combined into a more accountable system. The proposed Disaster Integrity and Accountability Framework provides a basis for integrating transparent targeting, open emergency contracting, end-to-end resource traceability, community verification and enforceable assurance.

The central conclusion is that technical preparedness without institutional integrity will remain insufficient. Early warnings, warehouses, response plans and reconstruction budgets protect citizens only when decisions are impartial and resources are traceable. Building resilience in Zimbabwe therefore requires a shift from reactive investigations towards preventive integrity embedded throughout the disaster cycle.

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