

# Social justice and conflicts within inland fisheries: a case study of Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe



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In 1955, the British colonial government forcibly removed or “uprooted” the BaTonga people from their land, the Zambezi River, that they occupied for many generations. When the Kariba Dam was built, the river was transformed to a lake and the BaTonga people had to be resettled to inferior land. The colonial government did not seek the people of BaTonga’s permission to flood their land and create an artificial lake. Uprooted from their land, they have left behind an important part of their life and a culture that was built around their relationship with the river.

Currently, the BaTonga or Basilwize (people of the Great River) ethnic group make up the majority of approximately 150,000 people that reside in Binga district located in the northern Zimbabwe. This ethnic group depends on fishing for food and income because the area is arid and cannot support major agricultural activities. Therefore, the Government of Zimbabwe, through the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Authority, Zambezi Water Authority, and the local government are now responsible for the governance of the river. As a result, multiple governmental structures set different levies for a fish permit.

Photo: *Fishers conducting fishing activities (boat) despite ban on fishing in the Zambezi basin, Zambezi river, Zimbabwe. 2018. ©Zimbabwe Parks*

**Location:**

Binga / Zambezi River, Zimbabwe

**Ecosystem type:**

Freshwater

**Main gear:**

Cast net, gillnet, harpoon, lift net, harvesting machines

**Target species:**

bream, kapenta

**No. of small-scale fishers:**

500

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## Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- Market
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- **Regulatory**
- Procedural
- **Environmental**
- COVID-19 related

Historically, there were multiple racial disputes between black gillnet and white kapenta fishers. The Zimbabwean government tried to address the racial imbalances by redistributing kapenta permits but to this day the conflicts still resurface (W. Mhlanga, 2014).

In addition, major conflicts arise between small-scale fishers and the fishery authorities. Fishing on the Zambezi river is dominated by commercial fishers from urban areas who are charged the same levies as the locals but often sell their catch in towns and cities at higher prices. It is difficult for the villagers to pay the US\$5 daily levy to fish, when most of them are living on less than a dollar a day. Villagers are forced to sneak in to poach for fish or stay at home and starve.

The authorities have reduced the time during which fishers can cast their nets (late afternoon to early morning). "*This has compromised production levels and it's now difficult for fishers to make ends meet and they hardly have anything to take home.*" (personal communication, based on a interview with a local fisherwoman). Those that are caught poaching often have to pay fines they cannot afford (\$20, or \$50 for unlicensed boats).

Poaching has also given rise to corruption; it is alleged that the Parks and Council wardens unsubstantially accuse villagers of poaching and take their fish at the end of the day. The authorities also alluded that levies would stay as they were as a way to discourage uncontrolled fishing that might lead to the depletion of resources.

### Definition of small-scale fisheries (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2012)

Traditional fisheries involving fishing households (as opposed to commercial companies) that do a relatively small number of trips, close to shore, and use the catch mainly for local consumption.

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## Dealing with justice

The Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD), an NGO that promotes sustainable economic and social policies for local communities, as well as helping villagers in Binga to improve their livelihoods, is advocating for an adjustment in the amount of levies being charged, supported by the fact that markets have been dwindling.

Further, the academia, together with the NGO, has been working tirelessly to convince the government that the only way to avoid problems of poaching in protected areas is through reducing the levies being paid by small-scale fishers. The researchers have also tried to provide frameworks that guide the fisheries sector to engage in a dialogue with policy makers and the responsible authorities on how best conflicts can be addressed at a community level. The government also introduced small-scale aquaculture within the river basin to curb problems such as overfishing. However, funding is not sufficient and causes even more problems since the project will be targeting only a small group at a given time. A lot needs to be done to attain blue justice in this local community, especially by removing the barriers between the academia and policy makers in the sense that research must be broken down into something that can be understood by the fishers in rural communities such as Binga, if we are to truly talk about sustainable fisheries.

### References:

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