

The Ecological Politics Surrounding the Downsizing and Downgrading of Public Park: A Reflection on the History of Change of the Harare Gardens in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT The study of protected area downgrading and downsizing (PADD) in Africa has largely been confined to rustic and nature reserves outside urban boundaries. This study addresses the gap in research practice and puts a focus on urban public parks, a reference to Harare Gardens, located within central Harare. The case study of this important park engaged the political ecology lenses as a basis for understanding the significance of public parks in urban environments. Operationalization of the study involved interviews with various stakeholders including the city officials and experts in urban planning and conservation, as well as observations and examination of published documents. Several lessons and observations are made. First, downsizing is mainly a result of increasing demand for urban land in Harare, which seems to be exhausted. Second, downscaling was explained through eco-development where the City of Harare sought to maximize on land-use. Third, the rationale for the PADD of Harare Gardens has been mainly for selfish reasons by individuals who manipulate the land market in Harare and subsequently benefit from the process. Fourth, politics takes a central role in influencing the occurrence of PADD in Zimbabwe that has been the case with Harare Gardens. Our findings suggest that the decision to downsize Harare Gardens was largely politically driven considering that such occurrences have been on-going in the city and led to the downsizing and downgrading of other protected areas such as wetlands.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a study that examined the downsizing and downgrading of public open spaces (POSS) in cities to urban sustainability by advancing the political ecology theory. The decision made by the City of Harare on 18th September 2017 to sell approximately 13% of Harare Gardens to Sunway City motivated this study [1]. Debated in council chambers but reaching an official decision to embark on the project, the decision was received with much disgruntlement from various stakeholders (environmentalists and some citizens) including a section of the urban planning professionals [2]. In this study, we examine the political ecology of downsizing and

downgrading Harare Gardens to understand the causes and consequences of this decision. Especially important is what the decision means to ordinary citizens who use the park for various activities.

Political Context of Harare

Harare is the capital city of Zimbabwe and is home to 2.1 million people, approximately 16% of the country's total population. The governance of Harare is controlled by the City of Harare that runs the affairs of the city with regards to land access and uses [3]. In this regard, the zoning of the land has traditionally been a mandate of the local authority guided by statutory plans. Before

2000, the ZANU-PF dominated national politics and was a stronghold political party across the country. The emergence of the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 2000 resulted in most urbanites rallying with this opposition party [4]. Consequently, from April 2002 the mayor for Harare was from this main opposition party. This meant that the affairs of Harare were now being administered by the opposition party yet the central government remained in the hands of the ruling ZANU-PF party. During the same period, from 2000 to 2008, Zimbabwe experienced an economic meltdown that resulted in poor urban development [5]. This was followed by a Government of National Unity between 2008 and 2013, which was characterized by the rule between ZANU-PF and MDC. Post-2013, the GNU was dissolved and ZANU-PF once again retained rule but Harare remained under the control of an MDC mayor. The politico-economic context of Harare was characterized by power struggles between MDC and ZANU-PF bred conflicts in urban governance as well as land use and access [6]. The result was conflict in terms of land allocation and land use where the ruling ZANU-PF went about parceling pieces of land to its supporters as well as land grabbing that was spearheaded by members of parliaments, politicians as well as Ministers [7]. It is in this same vein that the downsizing and downgrading of most land in Harare has been situated.

Study Area-Characterizing Harare Gardens

Harare Gardens is located at 17.8234°S , 31.0471°E on approximately 2,205 hectare piece of land bound by Herbert Chitepo Street on the north, Leopold Takawira Street on the west with Park lane running along with the eastern and southern parts (Figure 1). It is the largest public park in Harare. The original layout of this public park was designed in the early 1900s and constituted over 2,400 stands [8]. At the time, the park was meant to provide some recreational space for the Europeans elites who were living in the city and enable them to have some open space in the CBD as well as offer a place for recreation [8, 9]. As was the norm in most colonial cities at the time, for example, some parks in Johannesburg during apartheid South Africa were not accessible by the Africans [10]. Likewise, Africans were not allowed to access Harare Gardens that showed some marginalization of this group based on the political landscape of the colonial era, which privileged the Europeans. The politics of the park thus begins from

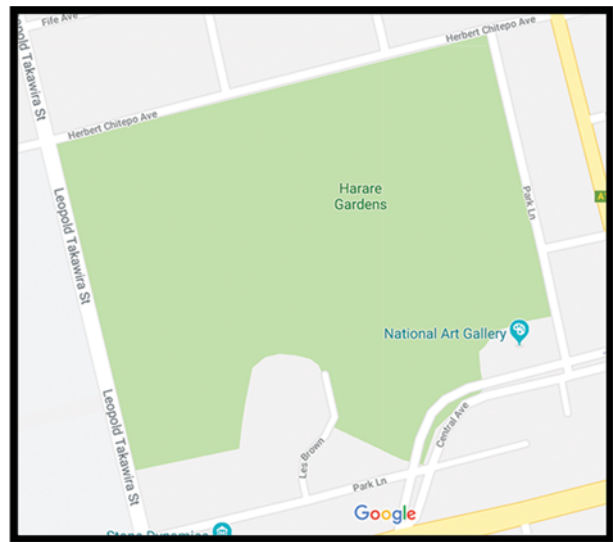


FIGURE 1. Map of Harare Gardens showing the National Art Gallery, which was once a part of the park. Another chunk of Harare, which has been converted to other uses, is the portion between Leopold Takawira Street, Park Lane, and Les Brown Street that accommodates Les Brown Pool, Monomotapa Hotel, and Harare City parking. Source: Google Images (2019).

this colonial era where it became a space serving the interests of the Europeans who enjoyed the flora and fauna¹ in the park.

Currently, Harare Gardens is designated as POS and recreation as provided by the Local Development Plan No. 22. The Harare Gardens is characterized by greenery spaces covered with lawn and lined with flowers giving the park an esthetical appeal (Figure 2). In an online survey by *TripAdvisor* to review the significance of Harare to citizens it emerged that 11.2% (7) respondents considered the park to be an excellent area for recreation while 23.8% (15) thought it was very good, 44.4% highlighted that it was average, 14.3% said it is poor while the remaining 6.3% (4) indicated that the park was a terrible place (Figure 3). One of the respondents indicated that it is an excellent place to rest and enjoy greenish and also its proximity to the CBD. Such utility of Harare Gardens confirms the argument by Symes et al. [11] that urban green spaces have psychological benefits to the users.

1. Harare Gardens previously had ponds with fish which provided an aesthetic appeal to the visitors to the park. There was also a sanctuary with animals such as monkeys, baboons, and rabbits which provided some educational opportunities for school children to see these animals. The park was thus also used for educational purposes.



FIGURE 2. The greenery and beauty of Harare Gardens with the view of the skyscrapers in the background giving the park an esthetical appeal enjoyed by most users of this public space. Source: Fieldwork (2018).

Perceptions of Harare Gardens to users

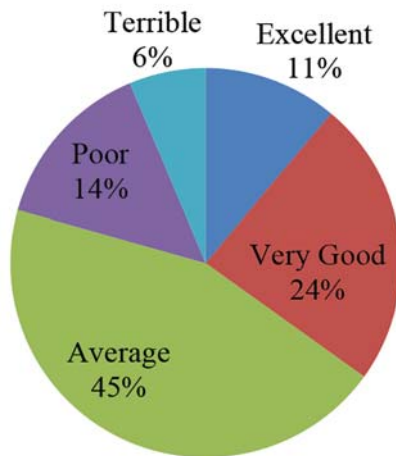


FIGURE 3. Perceptions of Harare Gardens to users.

Over the years several land users have encroached into the park, especially in the southern part (Figure 1). Space is allocated for two annual events, i.e., the Harare Book Fair and the Harare International Festival of the Arts. There are also instances of political activists holding meetings in the park as the park is very close again to both ZANU-PF headquarters and Harvest House (the opposition's HQ).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Protected areas are ecologically sensitive sites that are conserved and endangered due to their unique characteristics.

Such places include urban wetlands, wildlife conservatives, and open spaces such as Harare Gardens that may be protected by law through certain legislation or statutory provisions. Downsizing refers to decreases in the size of protected spaces due to changes in legal boundaries, which may be affected by the local authorities or central government [12]. Downgrading describes the reduction in the manner in which human activities are limited within a particular protected area [12, 13].

Respective of the utility of protected areas in urban spaces, protected area downgrading and downsizing (PADD) is increasingly becoming rampant and this calls for scrutiny through the lens of political ecology [12, 14, 15]. Political ecology focuses on the relationship that concerns the society and the environment. Its basis is on the impact of politics on decisions that relate to natural resource use and access [16]. The main thrust is to understand the stakeholders involved in decision-making and their motives with regards to a particular outcome concerning the environment. Consequently, the political ecology theory is used to understand the issues in PADD with special reference to Harare Gardens.

In understanding the motives of those undertaking decisions in PADD, it is critical to explore the political ecology theory. From a policy perspective, political ecology focuses on human-environment relationship. Urban parks around the world play a significant role in fulfilling the socio-economic function of cities as is evident from the role played by parks such as Millennium Park in Chicago, United States and the Washington Canal Park in Washington D.C. the local authorities have invested in developing these parks into tourist hubs, which earn them income from user fees and the integrated commercial functions that result in taxpayers contributing to the city's incomes [17].

In this instance, we explore the interaction between humans and urban public parks. On the one hand, there is a society that seeks to benefit from the park while on the other hand there are decision-makers who decide what use they can put the park to while capitalists perceive the park as an economic resource rather than a public good [17, 18]. These different perspectives of the park among different stakeholders bring to the fore critical insights that result in decisions being made to satisfy the needs and demands of a particular group, at times at the expense of the benefits that ought to be realized by the other group. In this sense, the focus will be on a maximum utilization of the urban spaces for the well-being of

the community taking into consideration the issue of sustainability. This may explain the need and rationale for PADD where the focus is on bringing in some economic activities rather than having open space, which does not yield any economic returns.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN

This study is qualitative and adopts the case study research design. The selection of Harare Gardens as the case study has been motivated by the fact that the park represents a large number of parks in a similar predicament, especially privately held ones in the city of Harare and plenty other cities around the country. For example, Masasa Park, Mukuvisi Woodlands, and Mbizi Game Park are equally vulnerable because of the increasing value of construction land, in and around Harare. Operationalization of the study involved interviews with various stakeholders including the city officials and experts in urban planning and conservation, as well as observations and examination of published documents. The operative City of Harare City Center Local Development Plan No. 22 was reviewed together with newspaper articles that focused on the responses of various stakeholders to the decision made by the City of Harare to dispose of part of the park. We went on to observe the park and see how it was being utilized by citizens, take photographs as well as engage in in-depth interviews with some of the users of the park. Moreover, key informant interviews were conducted with various professionals who included private and public planning professionals, urban ecologists and some officials from the City of Harare. Informal conversations were also conducted with some politicians in Harare. The interviews conducted enabled the researchers to hear the voices of various stakeholders such as the Combined Harare Residents Association, citizens, and the City of Harare officials. Content and textual analysis were used to analyze the information from the document review.

RESULTS

Four major themes emerged from this study. Increasing land scarcity in the CBD has put pressure on the existing open spaces in Harare. The PADD provides a means for CoH to generate income and taxes from the alternative land uses rather than the current use of the park. Also, there has been some need to revamp the park and make it

livelier as some parts of it have become home to vagrants and street kids making it unsafe. The move has been politically driven by selfish political elites who only focus on enriching themselves.

The Priceless Urban Space

Currently, Harare Gardens is used for multiple purposes. The uses range from recreation for both adults and children as there is a playing area, green places suitable for picnics, studying, and just relaxing. Citizens who were interviewed were against the decision to sell the park. They indicated that the decision will limit the part of the park accessible to them and eventually pave the way for such kind of developments in the future. Some of the responses from the citizens were as follows:

The park is priceless and one cannot imagine the council selling off part of it for a city that is already losing a great part of its open spaces through land barons.

Combine Harare Residents Association (CHRA) is a civic organization that has been instrumental in the preservation of Harare Gardens when Harare City Council wanted to sell it to African Sun Ltd for its hotel expansion. The CHRA opposed the sale on the basis that it would amount to privatization of a public space, which has over the years acted as a recreational facility for Harare residents [19]. One member of CHRA highlighted that:

We are alarmed that the Harare Gardens is gradually shrinking as a result of various individual ventures which will ultimately make it unreachable to ordinary members of the public. In as much as the City of Harare claims that the land-use of the park will remain the same, we all know that will not happen. Simply put many people will not be able to access the intended use gradually the park will end up being a no-go area for many of us we have to fight for the park.

Land Scarcity in the CBD

Land scarcity in the CBD was identified as a major driver to the downgrading of Harare Gardens. In an interview with an official from CoH, she indicated that the decision to sell part of the park was mainly triggered by the rising demand for urban space in the city center, yet land is currently scarce. She argued that POSs should be concentrated on the urban fringe and let the center of the city

be developed and brought to intensive use. The planning officer argued that:

Most of the objections are coming from planning professionals who are arguing that the public open space is a lung to the CBD so it cannot be developed. However, most of these including myself I can't remember the last time I used the recreational facilities in Harare Gardens. When I intend to refresh I go outside the CBD with my family to other places such as Mukuvisi Woodlands, Lake Chivero or Cleveland Dam. So I suggest we just have to let the CBD be an economic zone and not a recreational space.

The sentiments of the planner clearly show the need for separate land uses in the CBD and ultimately vetoing the downgrading of the park. In an informal conversation with a politician, it was mentioned that the land is a national resource that has to be used to advance the political agenda and it must benefit the patrons of the party.

Generate Income and Taxes from the Alternative Land Uses Rather Than the Current Use of the Park

Some respondents argued that the downsizing and downscaling of Harare Gardens was economically motivated. They highlighted that currently the park was not economically benefiting the local authority because it is a public space in which the council has to maintain and keep in good shape. The invasion of some parts of the park by street kids has been identified by many respondents as a threat to the users hence some felt the decision to sell part of the park was a noble idea. About this point, an official from CoH highlighted that:

So does it make sense to have a public space which the council is even failing to maintain and has become home to street children and street fathers who sleep there? Moreover, the place is no longer safe now. You cannot walk through the park at night or even during the day at times without risking being mugged. Thus it's better to reap some economic rewards from selling a portion of the park.

However, the decision to sell part of the park would then result in taxes and rates being collected from the new land-use that would become a perpetual stream of income for the city. Conversely, this point was refuted by most respondents among the citizens who indicated that the

council was just interested in solving its short-term financial mess rather than preserving Harare Gardens. Rather, it was argued that the economic benefits associated with the downscaling would only be enjoyed by a few while the ecological function of the park will be degraded to the disadvantage of the majority. In response to these sentiments, the planning official from CoH explained that:

The change of use is being done in such a way that it's only a portion of public land that has been sold to a private owner who will be guided but the existing land-use for the area which is to retain its function as a recreational space. All the developments are guided by statutes and have to be regulated through development control. Thus there is absolutely nothing wrong with what the council did.

The foregoing quote shows that although the part of the park will be sold to a private player, it will retain its original use and open to the public. This is not practical as capitalists seek to benefit from any investment that they make as explained in the forthcoming section.

Elite Capture

The findings also highlighted that the decision to downsize Harare Gardens was largely politically driven considering that such occurrences have been on-going in the city and led to the downsizing and downgrading of other protected areas such as wetlands. The overwhelming response was that the decision was spearheaded by some influential people who would eventually benefit from the sale of the portion of the park. These individuals mainly politicians used their powers to influence the decision by the City of Harare. However, it was highlighted by the planning officials that the issue was deliberated in Council chambers until a decision was reached. Hence, this refutes the claims by some individuals that the decision was politically driven. Yet, the minister of local government still has the final decision in matters related to land-use, hence the point remains considering the unscrupulous land deals that were rampant during the period. This indicates the powers that the minister has in overriding any decisions, which may contradict public opinion. In this regard, a planning official from CoH indicated that "despite all the mixed feelings against the sale the decision has already been finalized. You see the Regional Town and Country Planning Act empowers the Minister of Local Government to make

the final decision in planning matters and this is what has just happened in this instance.”

DISCUSSION

The study specifically looked at the ecological politics surrounding the downsizing and downgrading of Harare Gardens and the implications had on the ordinary citizenry as well as the CoH. Harare Gardens still has historical importance to the city. Findings of the study show that there has been a gradual encroachment of developments into the Harare Gardens with the recent one being the proposed development which would consume approximately 13% of the park. Although there were some mixed sentiments with regards to the proliferation of street kids in the park its significance remains undisputed as evident from the respondents, particularly the users of the park. For most of the citizens interviewed, they argued that Harare Gardens is priceless hence it needs to be left in its precinct state. Thus, the citizens and other civic organizations contested against the decision by CoH to dispose part of the park and convert it into a private space arguing that the economic value is less than the intrinsic value of the park. The argument raised by CoH is that the land-use remains the same, i.e., recreational yet in actual essence access to such a space will be restricted and based on income unlike the present state of the park. This conforms to the ideals of utilitarianism that focuses on the interests of a few individuals in decision-making with little regard for some stakeholders. Although the concept of eco-development is brought to the fore, the current economic gains, which the local authority purports to gain, are not equivalent to the price of the park, which is just priceless. Rather, the council has not made an effort to quantify and value the intrinsic worth of Harare Gardens that is much more than the value they are selling it. Therefore, at the end of the day, it seems the decision is merely undertaken to satisfy the economic gains of a few individuals rather than for the welfare of the citizens. It also emerges that the whole issue of labeling an area as protected is contextual and very fluid since one fails to understand whose decision matters the most and one asks the question then in whose interests are the parks protected for.

CONCLUSION

The political economy relating to downsizing and downgrading of the Harare Gardens has been outlined in this paper. This paper illustrates the importance of public parks as providing social and economic services to its users. The park is thus a critical element to the city of Harare as it provides citizens with psychological benefits, acts as a meeting space for political activists as well as annual events, which are hosted there. However, following the economic collapse of the country as well as the political conflicts in the country at large, there has been a contest for land resulting in the grabbing of public spaces such as Harare Gardens. The motive has been largely to advance the selfish interests of certain politicians. Consequently, there has been gradual downsizing of this park. The study recommends that local authorities need to appreciate the significance of public parks in promoting urban sustainability. In this way, there is a need to value the needs and values of citizens who make use of the park and think beyond the economic gains only accruing from the land-use that results in the downsizing and downgrading of the parks in the city. It is also recommended that the role of politicians and the elites be controlled so that land-use decisions are informed from a professional perspective instead of being a means of incentivizing certain individuals at the expense of the open spaces and citizens who benefit from such.

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the concept of PADD highlighting its usefulness in understanding land-use change and land values in both rural and urban areas.
2. Contrast PADD in rural areas and urban areas.
3. The case of Harare Gardens' PADD generated a lot of politics and politicking. As you understand politics, how useful is this study in unpacking any potential “drama” in urban development?
4. Identify the key stakeholders in this case study justifying your singling them out as key.
5. “The true value of parks is very complex.” React to this notion with respect to the example of this case.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AM and IC: conceptualization of the study. AM: study administration. AM, IC, MD, and FM: data curation. MD: data analysis. AM, IC, MD, and FM: writing – original draft. IC: case study questions.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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