Topic: The Urgent Need for Climate-Friendly Housing in Rural Zimbabwe

As Cyclone Idai Showed Us, It's Time to Rethink Our Approach to Rural Housing

In March 2019, Cyclone Idai devastated Chimanimani, Zimbabwe, leaving a trail of destruction that exposed the vulnerability of rural housing structures. Hundreds of families lost their homes, while many lives were lost due to the collapse of buildings made from fragile materials like brick and mortar, with corrugated iron roofs. This disaster was a wake-up call, highlighting the urgent need for climate-friendly housing in rural areas, particularly in high-risk regions like Chimanimani and Beitbridge.

What are Climate-Friendly Structures?

Climate-friendly structures are buildings designed to be more resilient to the forces of nature. They use environmentally friendly materials and construction methods to minimize damage during extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods, or heatwaves. These structures have already been implemented in developed countries, where sustainable building techniques have proven to be both disaster-resistant and cost-effective. In rural Zimbabwe, however, the adoption of such structures has been slow, largely due to economic constraints.

Why It Matters in Rural Zimbabwe

Rural areas like Chimanimani and Beitbridge are highly susceptible to natural disasters. The homes built in these regions are often constructed using low-cost materials that cannot withstand harsh weather. Cyclone Idai's impact made it clear that conventional construction methods are insufficient. Families were left homeless, and even livestock and food reserves were destroyed.

The primary issue is that many of these communities live below the poverty line. In 2018, the Food Poverty Line in Zimbabwe stood at $37 per person per month, making it almost impossible for rural households to afford more resilient structures. The estimated cost to build a climate-friendly

home in these areas is about $4,500, a prohibitive figure for most families. But what if we could find a way to make these structures more affordable?

Building Resilient, Affordable Homes

One solution to lowering the costs of climate-friendly housing is to use recycled materials. Reusing old steel for structural work and repurposing other materials available locally can cut expenses significantly. Another way to make these buildings more affordable is by training local communities to build their own homes. Not only does this save on labor costs, but it also empowers residents to take control of their own housing security.

Additionally, government and donor support will be critical. If we are to build 50 climate-friendly homes in Chimanimani and Beitbridge each year, as envisioned by many advocates, then external funding will be necessary. The government can help by providing subsidies or low-interest loans for sustainable construction projects, while international donors can pitch in by funding training programs and offering material grants.

A Roadmap for the Future

By shifting to climate-friendly housing, we can significantly reduce the risks that rural Zimbabwean communities face during extreme weather events. The key will be finding ways to make these structures affordable and accessible to all, while also engaging local populations in the construction process. As Cyclone Idai taught us, it’s no longer just an option—it’s a necessity.

Adopting these new methods won’t just make rural homes stronger. It will protect lives, secure livelihoods, and build a more resilient future for Zimbabwe’s most vulnerable populations.

References

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