

Pre-displacement Psychosocial Well-being Among Planned Displacement: The Perspectives of Msimbazi Basin Residents in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, development-induced displacements have become increasingly prevalent across developing countries, including Tanzania. However, the psychosocial impacts of these displacements remain under-explored in academic discourse. This article investigates the lived experiences of communities facing planned displacement in the Msimbazi River Basin, employing Cernea's impoverishment risks and reconstruction (IRR) model as a theoretical framework. Data was collected in October 2023 through an exploratory qualitative design, incorporating in-depth individual interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, documentary reviews, and field observations. The findings reveal that, in the absence of a comprehensive resettlement plan and adequate compensation, planned forced displacement significantly undermines the psychosocial well-being of the affected. It dismantles traditional modes of production, fractures social networks, erodes cultural identity; and compromises livelihoods, homes, and environments attuned to residents' skills and practices. These disruptions foster a profound sense of loss and dislocation, heightening the risk of mental health challenges and deepening impoverishment among displaced populations. The article concludes by emphasizing the critical need for inclusive planning processes in development projects. Ensuring community participation, fair compensation, structured resettlement, and accessible psychosocial support are imperative to mitigate the long-term adverse effects of displacement, and to uphold human dignity.

Keywords: *development-induced displacement, psychosocial well-being, mental health, forced relocation, Cernea's IRR model.*

1. Introduction

The global and national figures of forcibly displaced persons have risen significantly in recent decades largely due to conflicts, violence, climate change and development-induced displacement. Although large-scale development projects can contribute to national progress, they often increase the vulnerabilities of displaced populations (UNHCR, 2021). As of December 2021, more than 55m people were internally displaced, with over 85% having fled due to conflict, environmental degradation, or natural disasters (IDMC, 2021). In addition, a growing number of people are being evicted to make way for

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infrastructural expansion, often without adequate compensation and relocation plans to protect their safety and wellbeing (Vanclay, 2017; Eray et al., 2020).

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), displacement resulting from disasters, conflicts climate change and development projects is intensifying. According to the Danish Refugee Council (DRC, 2023), approximately 5.4m individuals were displaced in 2024 alone. Of these, nearly 70% were internally displaced due to a combination of environmental degradation and development pressures. The key contributing factors include conflicts, human rights violations, political instability, climate change, and environmental disasters (Elis et al., 2019; IDMC, 2021; UNHCR, 2022; IOM, 2024). Development-related evictions continue to displace vulnerable populations without providing adequate protection or compensation (UNHCR, 2021; Kweka, 2023).

In Tanzania, displacement to facilitate large-scale development projects has intensified over the last two to three decades (Mteki et al., 2017; Rigaud et al., 2021; Karashani, 2022). These projects include the expansion of roads, ports, railways, and dams; as well as wildlife conservation initiatives. For instance, the construction of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, a 1,143km project, displaced 296 households across eight regions, 21 districts, and 102 villages (Mugabi, 2023; East African Crude Oil Pipeline, 2018).

Dar es Salaam—Tanzania's commercial capital—has experienced rapid infrastructure development in recent years. Major projects include the Kurasini Port expansion, upgrade to roads in the Ubungu and Kimara–Mbezi corridors, the expansion of the Kipawa airport, and the Mtwara–Dar es Salaam pipeline. These projects have resulted in the displacement of thousands of residents (OXFAM, 2017; Mteki et al., 2017; World Bank, 2022). While these projects aim to improve the national infrastructure and service delivery, they frequently lead to significant socioeconomic disruptions, including increased poverty, psychological distress, and the loss of community cohesion of the affected population (Lone, 2014).

The Msimbazi River Basin (MRB) in Dar es Salaam exemplifies the intricate interplay between environmental degradation and urban development, culminating in planned displacement. Spanning approximately 271km², the MRB extends from the Pugu Hills to the Ilala District, and accommodates nearly 27% of Dar es Salaam's population, equating to about 1.6m residents (World Bank, 2019). Urban expansion has led to the encroachment of flood-prone areas, with settlements and infrastructure occupying river floodplains due to limited land availability and affordable housing options. This encroachment diminishes the basin's natural capacity to absorb floodwaters, thereby increasing the frequency and severity of floods. Notably, between 1985 and 2015, the extent of settlements in high-risk flood zones grew by 122%, compared to an 80% increase in safer areas (World Bank 2022).

Compounding these challenges, climate change has intensified rainfall patterns, leading to more frequent and severe flooding events. Generally, the

catastrophic rains are exacerbated by climate change and rapid urbanization, highlighting the increased risk of water disasters. Inadequate infrastructure—such as narrow bridge underpasses—obstructs the natural flow of the river, contributing to flooding. The Msimbazi River's channel has been altered due to human activities, including sedimentation from upstream deforestation and erosion, further reducing its capacity to manage floodwaters (World Bank, 2019).

The Msimbazi Basin Development Project seeks to address critical environmental and urban challenges by transforming the basin into a sustainable and climate-resilient urban space (World Bank, 2022). Central to the project is the reduction of flood risk through targeted interventions, including river channel dredging, the construction of retention ponds, and improvement to the drainage infrastructure. These measures aim not only to safeguard lives and property, but also to enhance water quality and restore the basin's ecological integrity (World Bank, 2019).

The Lower Msimbazi River Basin has been designated by the World Bank (2019) as a priority zone for integrated urban renewal, particularly focusing on flood mitigation and climate-resilient infrastructure development. However, the success of this initiative depends significantly on the relocation or displacement of residents from high-risk flood zones to pave way for the implementation of such a project (OXFAM, 2017; TARURA, 2024). Efforts to facilitate voluntary relocation have faced substantial challenges, primarily due to financial constraints and the strong socioeconomic attachments of the communities to their current locations (Mteki et al., 2017; World Bank, 2019).

According to Mteki et al. (2017), until 2015, threats of eviction were largely dismissed by local communities. However, beginning 2016, the Dar es Salaam City Council initiated the demolition of homes marked with red 'X's, often without adequate compensation or resettlement planning. In the MRB neighbourhoods of Jangwani and Mchikichini, 700 homes were demolished; and an additional 8,000 were marked for removal. Some displaced families were resettled in Mabwepande, a remote area with limited access to employment opportunities, exacerbating their socioeconomic vulnerabilities and strain (Mteki et al., 2017). Although these displacements are justified on the grounds of promoting public safety and economic development, they frequently result in the deterioration of livelihoods, increased poverty, and psychological distress among the affected populations (Lone, 2014; World Bank, 2019). For many, development and climate-induced displacement offer few direct benefits to the affected population; and instead intensify pre-existing social, economic, and cultural challenges (Bushesha & Mbura, 2014; Cernea, 2021; Karashani, 2022).

While the World Bank mandates adherence to international resettlement and compensation standards, these are often poorly adapted to local contexts, thus limiting their effectiveness (Vanclay, 2017; Kweka, 2023). Consequently, affected populations are often excluded from the benefits of development and face adverse

outcomes. Governments often invoke the power of eminent domain rather than engaging communities in participatory negotiations, thereby reinforcing displacement-related injustices and increasing socioeconomic instability.

Tanzania's Land Act of 1999 and its 2001 Compensation Claims Regulations stipulate the right to "full, fair, and prompt compensation" for individuals whose land or customary occupancy is expropriated for public use. Compensation may include monetary payments, land of equivalent value, or access to basic services. However, in the case of the MRB, it remains uncertain whether these legal protections are being upheld. Ambiguities around the recognition of customary land use and the practical application of international safeguards raise critical concerns about the adequacy and fairness of compensation, as well as the broader psychosocial effects on displaced communities.

The experiences of displacement hold vastly different meanings for those who benefit from development, and those who are directly affected by it (Vancley, 2017; Mteki et al., 2017; Kweka, 2023). While development projects often aim to improve livelihoods, expand services, or upgrade infrastructure, they can simultaneously undermine the well-being of displaced communities. Forced relocation frequently results in the loss of homes, social networks, and economic security; thereon contributing to heightened levels of psychological stress and reduced quality of life (Eray et al., 2020; Eiroa-Orosa, 2020).

Psychological or psychosocial wellbeing (PWB) is a key component of overall health, and is strongly correlated with life satisfaction, productivity, and developmental outcomes (Ryff, 2014; Burns, 2016; Steptoe, 2019). Individuals with high PWB tend to have better physical and mental health, greater resilience, and a stronger capacity to adapt to change (Burns, 2016; Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). PWB encompasses the absence of mental disorders; and includes biological, psychological, and socioeconomic dimensions that allow individuals to function effectively within their families, communities, and the society at large (WHO, 2004; Maxwell et al., 2015).

Exposure to displacement-related stressors—such as forced displacement, violence, separation from family or homeland, loss of livelihood, poverty, and the lack of access to essential services—can severely undermine mental health and psychosocial well-being (Arayan, 2019; Kumar, 2020; Islam et al., 2022). Depression, PTSD, and increased mortality are frequently reported among displaced populations, either as direct outcomes of the displacement process, or the conditions encountered during resettlement (Steel et al., 2009; Slove, 2017; Kumar, 2020). Traumatic experiences can destabilize a person's psychological structure, leading to the erosion of ego stability and overall mental functioning. Sukiasyan (2024) indicates that over one-quarter of migrants and forcibly displaced individuals suffer from mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. In addition to the psychological toll, displacement places increased pressure on already strained healthcare and social support systems,

highlighting the need for integrated mental health and psychosocial responses (Islam et al., 2022). Burns (2016) and Eiroa-Orosa (2020) conceptualize PWB as a multidimensional construct reflecting both intra- and inter-personal positive functioning. It includes the capacity to develop meaningful relationships, a sense of autonomy, mastery, personal growth, and life purpose. PWB bridges various domains of life: emotional, economic, physical, and social; and is vital for achieving sustainable development and long-term recovery. Displacement often disrupts these domains, leading to a loss of connection with family, land, and resources: all resulting in social exclusion, impoverishment, and psychological distress (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020).

Forced displacement exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, including the breakdown of family structures and community networks. It disrupts access to essential social services and protection mechanisms, such as education and healthcare (Dybdahl et al., 2022). This disruption increases the risks of child labour, transactional sex, orphanhood, neglect, and various forms of violence – such as sexual, psychological, and physical – that affect both children and their caregivers (UNHCR, 2021; Dybdahl et al., 2022; Taylor & Kaplan, 2023). In children and the youth, the experience of displacement can result in profound psychological and educational consequences, including heightened risks of mental health conditions such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Dybdahl et al., 2022).

In low-income urban settings, displaced populations face intensified challenges related to poverty, insecurity, limited access to psychosocial support; and heightened exposure to violence, exploitation, stigma, and abuse. These difficulties are often most acute in the immediate and aftermath of displacement as individuals struggle to re-establish a sense of normalcy (Verme & Schuettler, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023).

Forced displacement, especially among vulnerable populations, is frequently linked to crisis; and is often accompanied by significant emotional and psychological distress, even when it occurs within the context of broader development initiatives (Robinson, 2004; Lone, 2014). Regardless of its underlying causes, displacement is inherently a social issue that impacts multiple levels of human organization, from ethnic and rural communities to urban populations. Particularly at risk are vulnerable groups such as individuals with disabilities, children, women, the elderly, and internally displaced persons.

Psychological distress affects all displaced groups; such as men, women, and children. However, research suggests that the psychological impact of displacement depends on the severity of deprivation, suffering, and uncertainty experienced; as well as individuals' perceptions of the opportunities or challenges presented in the new locations (McFarlane, 2010; Taylor & Kaplan, 2023). When adequate compensation, economic support, and resettlement measures are in place, displacement related to development projects may be both justifiable and beneficial for the affected populations and stakeholders (Robinson, 2004; Cernea, 2021).

The destabilizing effects of development-induced displacement have become a growing concern among psychologists, especially given the global surge in large-scale infrastructure projects and climate change. Displacement is associated with increased rates of depression, PTSD, and even elevated mortality; often as a direct or indirect consequence of the displacement experience (Steel et al., 2009; Slove, 2017; Kumar, 2020; Islam et al., 2022; Dybdahl et al., 2022). Among displaced populations, the prevalence of trauma is particularly high (Islam et al., 2022). Traumatic experiences can severely disrupt an individual's sense of self, destabilizing ego functions, and impairing overall mental health. These disruptions are the key contributors to the psychological difficulties encountered by displaced individuals.

Despite the increasing prevalence of development-induced and climate change displacements and their documented psychosocial effects, there is notable limited research in Tanzania examining the mental health and well-being of affected populations, both before and after relocation or displacement. Most existing studies have concentrated on other aspects: for example, Mteki et al. (2017) on social impact; Bushesha and Mbura (2015) on socioeconomic impact; and Riguald et al. (2021) on climate and internal migration. This study sought to address this gap by exploring the psychosocial wellbeing of a population subject to planned displacement in the context of the Msimbazi river basin project in the metropolitan Dar es Salaam.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Cernea's (1997, 2008) impoverishment risks and reconstruction model (IRRM), a comprehensive framework for analysing the risks associated with development-induced displacement, and designing effective reconstruction strategies. The IRRM identifies key impoverishment risks such as landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, and social disarticulation; and serves as a tool for risk prediction, diagnostic analysis, counter-risk planning, and empirical research (Cernea, 2008). While the IRRM primarily focuses on economic and social dimensions, the model also provides a valuable lens for examining the psychosocial impacts of displacement, particularly among poor urban populations.

When applied to urban contexts, the IRRM highlights the multifaceted nature of displacement-related vulnerabilities. Landlessness, for example, entails more than the physical loss of shelter; it signifies the erosion of stability and personal security, often resulting in heightened anxiety, stress, and depression (Vanclay, 2017; Patel et al., 2023). Many urban residents, such as those in the MRB, lack formal land tenure, which exacerbates their marginalization, and excludes them from fair compensation (Schmidt et al., 2022). The disruption of livelihoods further deepens economic insecurity, frequently linked to mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance abuse (Ferris & Soltesova, 2021; Porter & Haslam, 2022).

Homelessness resulting from displacement often leads to overcrowded, unsafe, and unsanitary living conditions; compounding physical and emotional stress, especially among already marginalized communities (Cernea, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). The loss of social networks and community ties undermines emotional support systems; intensifying feelings of isolation, grief, and despair (Mteki et al., 2017; Bäärnhielm et al., 2020). Marginalization further reinforces these psychosocial stressors by excluding displaced populations from political, social, and economic participation; eroding their sense of identity and self-worth (O’Loghlen & McWilliams, 2017; Taylor & Kaplan, 2023).

Studies indicate that inadequate access to basic services such as healthcare, clean water, and sanitation aggravates both physical and mental health challenges, compounding existing vulnerabilities (Verme & Schuettler, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Food insecurity—particularly among those reliant on unstable wage labour—contributes to emotional distress, nutritional deficiencies, and cognitive decline (Nguyen et al., 2023). These interconnected stressors place displaced urban populations at a heightened risk for a range of mental health conditions, emphasizing the need for comprehensive, trauma-informed approaches in resettlement planning.

Other studies link forced displacement among low-income populations to a range of compounding vulnerabilities, including the loss of access to public services, interruption of formal education, violations of civil and human rights, and increased risks of mental health challenges (Maghembe-Mushi, 2018; Verme & Schuettler, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). These disruptions often extend beyond the displaced populations themselves, affecting host communities as well. While some host communities experience heightened poverty and strained resources, others may perceive opportunities in accommodating the newly arrived populations, highlighting the context-dependent nature of these impacts (Vanclay, 2017).

In light of these interconnected risks, Cernea’s IRRM (1997, 2008) elucidates the critical importance of reconstruction strategies that promote psychosocial well-being alongside economic and physical recovery. Effective responses include community-led resettlement approaches that preserve cultural identity and maintain social cohesion, as well as economic reintegration initiatives, such as employment generation and skills development programmes that aim to alleviate financial stress (Maghembe-Mushi, 2018; Cernea, 2021; Rigaud et al., 2021; Porter & Haslam, 2022). The provision of mental health services and peer support networks is also essential in addressing trauma, and fostering resilience in forced displacement.

Secure and dignified resettlement solutions play a key role in reducing homelessness and marginalization, while ensuring access to basic services and well-being (Cernea, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Moreover, policy interventions must guarantee fair compensation, legal protection, and the integration of displaced populations into urban systems (O’Loghlen & McWilliams, 2017).

Together, these multidimensional strategies highlight the continued relevance of the IRRM as a comprehensive framework for addressing the psychosocial consequences of forced displacement, particularly in vulnerable urban settings such as the MRB.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

To assess the pre-displacement impact on the psychosocial well-being of affected populations, this study employed a qualitative exploratory approach. This design was chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth understanding of social realities through a naturalistic lens, capturing the meanings and interpretations of participants in their own words (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2014). A qualitative design was particularly well-suited in exploring how individuals perceived and experienced their psychological and socioeconomic well-being, as it acknowledges that people's lives are shaped by broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. It also recognizes the influence of individual subjectivity on lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Ahuja, 2013). By focusing on first-hand narratives and authentic reporting, this approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of participants' circumstances and psychosocial conditions in the context of pre-displacement (Ahuja, 2013; Mohajan, 2018).

3.2 Study Area

This study was conducted in metropolitan Dar es Salaam, the largest industrial and administrative city in Tanzania, located on the East African coastline along the Indian Ocean. According to the 2022 national census, Dar es Salaam had a population of 5.3m people, with 5% of the city's population residing in the MRB, the largest watershed in the region covering an area of 192 km², or 15% of Dar es Salaam's total land area. The MRB is home to about 1.6m people, many of whom have lived in the area for decades despite ongoing climate-related risks (URT, 2022). The MRB is part of the Ilala District, which is strategically important for Dar es Salaam due to its commercial, geographic, and ecological significance. It includes vital transportation infrastructure that connects the central business district, such as Kariakoo, the city's primary commercial hub, to the other regions (World Bank, 2022).

The MRB encompasses informal settlements like Hananasif, Mchikichini, Ilala, and Jangwani. The study specifically focused on Jangwani, which is identified as a 'hazardous' area prone to flooding. The area has the highest population density compared to other catchments in the city, owing to its proximity to the city centre and its convenience for socioeconomic activities. Despite the challenges posed by flooding, the MRB remains home to a large portion of the population, with the basin accounting for about 27 per cent of Dar es Salaam's population. The MRB is highly vulnerable to flooding, which

threatens lives, homes, livelihoods, and infrastructure, particularly during heavy rains. Nonetheless, residents have remained in the area for decades, even as they face significant climate change risks. The MRB project, which aims to reduce flooding risks and enhance urban resilience, is planned for the same vulnerable location (World Bank, 2019).

Efforts to mitigate climate risks have included persuading residents to voluntarily relocate, with the Dar es Salaam City Council issuing eviction threats to those who refuse to move (Mteki et al., 2017). However, most residents have been unable to relocate due to their strong socioeconomic ties to the area, and the high cost of public transport and livelihood alternatives (World Bank, 2019). While some families have expressed willingness to move, financial barriers prevent many from leaving (World Bank, 2019). In 2016, some Jangwani and Mchikichini residents were offered land in Mabwepande to rebuild their homes, but the new location was far from the city's socioeconomic opportunities, undermining their ability to establish new lives. During this displacement, 700 homes were demolished, with an additional 8,000 slated for demolition (Mteki et al., 2017), which was planned to take place in 2024.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to select research sites within the MRB, focusing on consenting individuals aged between 24 and 65 years, who had been scheduled for displacement in October 2023. The sample included women, men, and the youth residing in the MRB, with the local authority facilitating the sampling process. There were 7 key informants, and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) consisting of 10 persons each. These were chosen based on their direct experiences with the impending displacement; ensuring the collection of rich and relevant data.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Interviews, FGDs, field observation and documentary review were used to collect data to understand the psychosocial well-being of the planned relocation of the population from the MRB.

3.4.1 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are an essential qualitative research method well-suited for exploring the nuanced, context-specific experiences of individuals affected by, or involved in, forced relocation (Guest et al., 2020). When studying the MRB, in-depth interviews with key informants, affected residents and local leaders were crucial in uncovering the psychosocial, economic, and cultural dimensions of displacement. This method enabled the researcher to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies in detail; thus capturing the emotional, psychological and social consequences that may not have been possible through quantitative approaches alone (Brinkmann, 2021).

According to Palinkas et al. (2015) and Creswel (2014), in-depth interviews are particularly valuable when researching sensitive topics, such as forced displacement and trauma, because they allow for trust-building and flexibility; encouraging participants to share personal insights that standardized tools might overlook. In contexts like the MRB – where informal settlement dynamics, historical place attachment, and socioeconomic vulnerability intersect with environmental risk and state-led relocation programmes – in-depth interviews provided a platform for participants to voice their concerns, aspirations, and resistance strategies (Hoelscher & Parsons, 2020). It was possible to discover gaps between policy intentions and implementation, hence gaining data that could inform more humane and effective urban resettlement strategies (Smit & Parnell, 2020; Levien, 2021). The employment of in-depth interviews with key informants in the MRB was not only methodologically appropriate but also ethically sound, allowing for a bottom-up, people-centred understanding of the impacts and processes of forced relocation in urban Tanzania.

3.4.2 Focus Group Discussion (FGDs)

This study employed FGDs to explore how different community groups in the MRB experience and respond to forced relocation. Three FGDs were conducted, each with 10 participants, involving men, women, and the youth, to capture diverse perspectives. This segmentation acknowledges that displacement affects demographic groups differently; with women, men, and the youth prioritising distinct concerns such as caregiving, employment, and future opportunities (Krueger & Casey, 2015). FGDs have the advantage of encouraging interaction and uncovering collective insights, making them ideal for the MRB's close community. This method was deemed suitable as it supports participatory research by promoting inclusivity and empowering participants to share their experiences and concerns in a supportive environment (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

3.4.3 Field Observation

Field observation was used as it allows for a direct assessment of environmental, social, and behavioural conditions within a community. In the MRB, field observation offered critical insights into the psychosocial well-being of residents facing the threat of forced relocation. Through systematic observation of everyday life – such as housing conditions, community interactions, body language, emotional expressions, and social behaviour – the researcher could identify visible indicators of stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and resilience among the community members. Observing non-verbal cues and community dynamics provided a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of how individuals and groups respond to the disruption of their environment and livelihoods (Creswel & Poth, 2018). In the MRB, where residents live double threats of flooding and displacement, field observation complemented the interviews and FGDs by

capturing what people might have been unable to verbalize due to fear, mistrust, or fatigue. Through observation, it was possible to notice signs of isolation, dilapidated houses, or visible neglect of household surroundings. People showed signs of sadness and despair as they presented their grievances, suggesting they were undergoing psychosocial strain. Apart from triangulation, field observation helps validate self-reported data, offering a more holistic picture of the emotional and social impacts of displacement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.4.4 Documentary Review

Documentary review was carried out to collect secondary data and contextual information, particularly in complex, policy-driven environments such as the MRB. The review involved a systematic analysis of existing documents such as government reports on environmental and social impact assessments. Reviewing literature on the psychosocial wellbeing, urban planning frameworks, project proposals, NGO reports, and media articles helped the researcher to understand the official narratives, policy intentions, and legal frameworks governing forced relocation in the MRB. It also provided insights into how displacement has been historically managed, and how it is justified or contested in public discourse (Bowen, 2009).

In the MRB context, documentary review revealed critical information regarding the scope and objectives of development projects, compensation plans, risk mitigation strategies, and the roles of different actors such as municipal authorities, and donor agencies. This method was particularly helpful in triangulating data collected through interviews, focus groups, and field observations by identifying consistencies and discrepancies between official records and lived experiences. Documentary review was important in enhancing credibility of the research; as well as deepening the understanding of the political, institutional, and historical contexts surrounding urban displacement in the MRB (Bowen, 2009; Creswel & Pot 2018).

3.5 Data Analysis

The data collected from the MRB was analysed using *thematic analysis*, a method suitable for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). This approach allowed the researcher to explore community perceptions and responses to forced relocation, as well as the associated psychosocial impacts of displacement.

The analysis followed a structured process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, and then defining and naming them. Thematic analysis facilitated both *inductive* (emerging from the data) and *deductive* (guided by theory) coding. This enabled the integration of context-specific insights with relevant theoretical frameworks, such as Cernea's impoverishment risks and reconstruction (IRR) model, which focuses on the

socioeconomic risks associated with displacement. This analytical process was very useful in revealing both *shared* and *divergent* experiences among community members, highlighting key dimensions of *vulnerability and resilience*, especially in terms of *gender, age, and socioeconomic status*. Thematic analysis was appropriate for the MRB's informal urban context, where qualitative methods offer deep insights into lived experiences often overlooked in top-down policy frameworks.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Before initiating this study, all requisite research protocols were followed to ensure ethical compliance. Approvals were obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam, regional administration secretary, the district commissioner of Ilala, who introduced the researcher to the relevant officials/respondents in the research area. Throughout the research process—including data collection, analysis, and participant interactions—the researcher maintained strict adherence to ethical standards. Informed consent was secured from all participants; emphasizing voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage without any problem. To protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality, the words 'woman' or 'man' are employed in lieu of names; and sensitive data was handled with utmost care. All necessary measures were taken to ensure that participants were not exposed to any harm; aligning with the ethical guidelines for health research in Tanzania as indicated by Mashalla et al. (2009).

3.7 Research Findings and Discussion

3.7.1 Lived Experiences and Adaptive Strategies of Residents in the MRB

The MRB in Dar es Salaam has long served as a settlement area for low-income urban residents, many of whom have lived in this flood-prone zone for decades (World Bank, 2019). The study findings revealed that some households in the Bondeni area have resided there since the early 1950s, when the land was primarily agricultural, and the area was perceived as safe and habitable. The majority of the current residents settled there between the 1980s and early 2000s, when flooding occurred infrequently, and was considered manageable. However, in recent years, flooding has intensified due to a combination of factors such as rapid urbanization, climate change, unplanned settlement, and encroachment on the natural drainage system of the basin.

Residents noted that the increasingly severe flood events have not deterred them from remaining in the area; primarily due to its strategic location in the city, affordability, and access to crucial infrastructure. Proximity to economic hubs such as Kariakoo, major healthcare institutions like the Muhimbili National Hospital, and public transportation networks: all provide daily livelihood opportunities that are not easily replicable in other parts of the city. The convenience and economic potential of the area have fostered a strong sense of attachment, even amid growing environmental risks. This was made evident by one resident, thus:

"When we came here, the land was cheap; and the area is accessible to all social and economic services. Here is part of the city centre and close to business areas, hospitals like Muhimbili, and government offices. The roads that connect to the rest of the city and country are here... This is the centre of everything. You can do any business and survive well despite the challenges. That's why we've stayed here despite all odds." (FGD, Man, Bondeni, 2023).

These lived experiences reflect what Cernea (1997, 2008) identifies in his impoverishment risks and reconstruction model as a complex process of risk accumulation; whereby displacement is not only physical but also socioeconomic and psychological. The main risks outlined by Cernea include landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, social disarticulation, marginalization, and loss of access to common property resources. These are evident from the experiences of Msimbazi residents. However, unlike cases of formal displacement, these residents have self-settled and continue to resist relocation, which adds a unique layer of agency and adaptation to their story.

Despite the recurring environmental hazards, residents have developed a variety of coping and resilience strategies. A common adaptive approach has been temporary relocation during the rainy season to the homes of relatives or neighbours on higher ground, while continuing with business activities in the area. This adaptive mobility reflects not only resilience but also the residents' prioritization of livelihood continuity over physical safety. One long-term resident testified to this:

"I was born here 55 years ago. There were farms here, and no floods. Now there are floods, but when the rainy season starts, we move to stay with the family in safer places. I continue my small business... so only the house is affected. We've learned to help each other and adapt." (KII, Woman, Bondeni, October 2023).

In addition to temporary relocation, community-based mutual support, informal early warning systems, and the lifting of household items during floods: were also reported as common survival strategies. These practices highlight the presence of localized knowledge and collective coping mechanisms; what Cernea (2008) refers to as 'social capital', which can serve as a vital resource during reconstruction and risk mitigation processes. Nonetheless, the psychological toll of repeated flooding remains high. As noted by Taylor and Kaplan (2023), environmental displacement—particularly in urban low-income contexts—can lead to elevated stress, anxiety, and a persistent sense of insecurity. These issues align with Cernea's extension of the IRRM to include psychosocial risks, which are often under-recognized in traditional displacement planning. Emotional attachment to a place, a sense of belonging, and loss of identity are significant stressors; especially when displacement is imminent or recurrent. One participant had this opinion:

"I had a good house and furniture, but after the floods, these were unrecognizable. Mud everywhere. The evaluator couldn't guess its value. But here is my home. It means everything to me." (IDI, Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

These reflections underline the need for displacement and resettlement planning frameworks that account for psychosocial well-being, cultural identity, and informal economic dimensions often overlooked in top-down relocation efforts. As recommended by Rigaud et al. (2021), and reinforced by Oxfam (2023), any sustainable relocation strategy must be participatory, culturally sensitive, and inclusive of livelihood and mental health support. Moreover, many residents, especially those without formal land tenure, face compounded risks of exclusion, inadequate compensation, and marginalization; further deepening their vulnerability (Schmidt et al., 2022; World Bank, 2022). These dynamics reflect the systemic nature of urban poverty, where displacement risks intersect with structural inequalities in the access to land, services, and voice in planning processes.

3.7.2 Attachment to Home and the Impact of Forced Displacement

The findings from the MRB reveal that, for many residents, their current settlements are not merely places of residence but deeply symbolic places of long-standing social bonds, livelihoods, identity, and belonging. Despite enduring chronic challenges such as flooding, environmental degradation, and insecure tenure, the residents consistently expressed a strong emotional and psychological attachment to their communities. This attachment, deeply rooted in decades of habitation, has become a major factor in their resistance to forced displacement. One long-term resident expressed his own opinion thus:

"I was born here... this is my home, my life is rooted here; my home, livelihood, my community is here...my work, friends, and neighbour. It feels as if this area is part of me... taking me away from here is like killing me." (KII, Man, Bondeni, October, 2023).

This sense of attachment extends beyond the physical space to encompass *social capital*, which includes networks of support, shared histories, and informal economic systems. According to Cernea's IRRM (1997, 2008), the loss of such social capital—defined in his model as *social disarticulation*—constitutes a major impoverishment risk in cases of development-induced displacement. In the Msimbazi case, displacement threatens not only to sever physical connections to home, but also to disrupt critical emotional, cultural, and social anchors that residents have cultivated over the years. Studies by Oktaye (2020) and Graham et al. (2015) emphasize that 'home' is not merely a shelter, but a symbolically and emotionally significant space tied to identity, security, and meaning. It is where individuals exercise *personal control, privacy, and self-expression*: factors critical to psychological well-being and resilience (Meagher & Cheadle, 2020; Afshar et al., 2017). Hence, the loss of this space due to forced displacement often leads to feelings of powerlessness, grief, and existential dislocation. This was made evident when a respondent made the following comment:

"Moving from a place where you have lived for many years is very difficult. Yes, they said we must go... but go where? We don't know where we will go. Just thinking of it makes me feel sick, confused, and completely stuck... it is so painful." (FGD, Old Woman, Msimbazi, October 2023).

The planned evictions have led to *pre-displacement trauma*, a form of psychological distress occurring even before the actual relocation. This was particularly evident in older residents who feel unprepared – physically, emotionally, or financially – for starting anew. In the words of one elderly woman:

"This time it is clear that we have to go because we signed... but I am unprepared and very scared indeed because I have no money and no energy to restart afresh elsewhere at this age... I prefer to die." (KII, Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

The respondent's expression reflects Cernea's (2008) caution that *forced displacement without adequate planning, compensation, and psychosocial support* leads to profound impoverishment risks not only materially, such as homelessness or joblessness, but also *psychologically and culturally*. These risks are particularly acute among vulnerable populations such as the elderly, single women, or those with dependent children. Several respondents in the study expressed the need for *mental health support* during and after the displacement process. This aligns with findings by Siriwardhana and Stewart (2013), who argue that the trauma of displacement can result into anxiety, depression, PTSD, and even suicidal ideation; particularly when relocation is involuntary, poorly communicated, or inadequately supported. Two respondents from Msimbazi lamented thus:

"As for me, I am very tired with this push, push; I have accepted to move but I am appealing to the government or the private sector to help us psychologically... otherwise, it will lead to madness or confusion. I feel too sad and tired." (IDI, Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

"When you're told to leave with no money and no plan, you feel uprooted from your work, your life, your people; it feels like you are running mad... if we don't receive help, we will develop mental health problems." (FGD, Man, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

According to Schwartz (2023), the trauma of forced displacement can disrupt the ego's internal structure, causing what he terms 'displacement trauma,' in which an individual's inner self becomes shaken from the psychological and physical stability. This phenomenon was strongly reflected in participant narratives, as follows:

"When thinking of being removed from here, it makes me feel sick. I feel scared and often frozen... sometimes I prefer to die before this happens. I have nightmares almost every day. This is too difficult to handle." (KII, Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

"My compensation money is not enough even to pay for transport to Mlandizi. I am really confused... I tied my stomach and drank water to survive. My children go to school hungry. I built this house alone. Now, where will I go?" (FGD, Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

In Cernea's terms, this reflects *marginalization* and *economic disempowerment*, which are both central risks within the IRRM. The inability to secure an alternative home, livelihood, or social support system post-displacement leads to downward movement and emotional devastation.

3.7.3 Disaster-Induced Displacement or Valuable Land for Project? Reframing the Debate in the MRB

Displacement caused by development or environmental disasters is often framed as a necessity for public good. However, this justification can be complex, contested, and entangled with questions of land value, urban investment priorities, and vulnerability. In the case of the MRB, while the government justified relocation on the grounds of safety and environmental protection, local residents interpreted the narrative differently; raising suspicion about hidden development agenda and inequitable treatment.

According to the Tanzania Rural and Urban Roads Agency (TARURA, 2024), the overarching goals of the MRB development initiative include mitigating flood risks, controlling soil erosion, enhancing land-use efficiency, restoring natural vegetation, and improving urban water management. These aims align with global urban resilience strategies, particularly in flood-prone cities affected by climate change. The project is supported by international development partners, notably the World Bank, which views the basin as a priority site for urban transformation (World Bank, 2019). However, residents report that they were initially informed that the area had become *uninhabitable due to flooding risks*. This rationale was accepted by some until the construction of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) station, and the planned development of a multimillion dollar urban infrastructure project in the same area (World Bank, 2022). Such developments cast doubt on the narrative that the area was ‘unsafe’; suggesting instead that *land value and strategic investment potential* might be driving the evictions. This was expressed in one of the FGDs:

“If the area is dangerous, it is dangerous for who? If it’s hazardous, why is the government investing in the same place? The national hospital, MOI, is here too. Why are they removing us? If it’s dangerous for us, is it safe for them? Couldn’t our government leave a place for us too, or rehabilitate a portion for us?” (FGD, Young Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

This scepticism reflects a broader critique of *development-induced displacement (DID)*, where projects marketed as public goods may exacerbate inequality and deepen the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Lone, 2014; Orendain & Djalante, 2021). The contested displacement in Msimbazi echoes the dynamics described in Cernea’s IRRM, which outlines various primary risks associated with forced resettlement such as *landlessness, homelessness, social disarticulation, and marginalization* (Cernea, 1997; 2008). Some residents explicitly questioned whether displacement was truly due to hazard mitigation, or a *strategic move to free up land for elite investment*. In interviews and focus groups, people expressed anger and disbelief at the dual narrative:

“They clearly said we must leave the place because it’s not safe... but we’ve lived here for decades. Now they are sending us away, and suddenly a mega project is coming here! I think they just want this land for investment... but they could also get only a portion of it, and leave a section for us.” (IDI, Young Man, Msimbazi, October 2023).

Many also challenged the *compensation process*, arguing that it did not reflect the *true market value of land in a central business zone* like the MRB. One man remarked as follows:

"... they say they are compensating us, but this is the city centre; one square meter here is around TZS 800,000. At least they should balance it in the compensation. Otherwise, we'll lose everything: livelihood access, connections... we will lose ourselves too. This is too painful." (FGD, Man, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

This sentiment is supported by the World Bank (2019) itself, which describes the MRB as socially, economically, and culturally valuable. These competing narratives of *risk reduction versus land acquisition* create deep psychosocial tensions among residents who felt being *excluded from urban transformation processes* that will shape their future life.

3.7.4 Differential Vulnerability and Psychosocial Impacts

The study revealed that *vulnerability to displacement impacts is not evenly distributed*. Women, the elderly, children, persons with disabilities, and the chronically ill are disproportionately affected. These groups report heightened *psychological distress, confusion, fear, and hopelessness*, particularly as relocation plans remained vague and compensation uncertain. One elderly woman expressed the overwhelming burden:

"I'm so confused and worried... where will I go with my old parents, my children, and a sick child I take to the clinic twice a month? Sometimes I think it's better if I died before this happens. I have no idea where to start or stop...I feel as if I will run crazy." (FGD, Elderly Woman, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

This testimony is emblematic of '*pre-displacement trauma*', a psychological condition associated with prolonged uncertainty, fear of the unknown, and imminent loss of home and social identity (Siriwadhana & Stewart, 2013; Schwartz, 2023). According to Tanzania's National Resettlement Policy (2014: iv), special consideration must be given to individuals and households that are vulnerable by virtue of gender, age, disability, or socioeconomic disadvantage.

Further comparisons were drawn by some residents during the FGDs between their situation and the *relocation of the Maasai from Ngorongoro to Handeni District (Msomera)*. In the latter case, the government provided housing, land, and infrastructure support, raising questions about why *urban displaced populations like those in Msimbazi* are not accorded similar treatment:

"If they could relocate the Maasai with their cows and build houses for them, why not us? Why not give us land and build houses too, or just give us land at a lower cost?" (FGD, Man, Msimbazi, October, 2023).

This comparison illustrates perceptions of *procedural differences*, where not only are outcomes unequal, but the *processes of consultation, compensation, and relocation*

planning are also perceived to be unfair; causing further discontentment and psychological suffering to the affected population. The Msimbazi people argued that if the Ngorongoro-Msomera procedures were adapted everywhere, this would reduce many sufferings and strain on the affected population.

8. Conclusion

This article examined the pre-displacement psychosocial well-being of residents in the MRB, underlining the profound challenges that forced displacement poses to affected populations. The anticipated impacts extend beyond physical relocation; and encompass significant socioeconomic and psychological consequences. Prolonged uncertainty, inadequate compensation, and the absence of clear relocation plans have emerged as the major sources of psychosocial stress; particularly for women, children, the elderly, and individuals with chronic illnesses, all of whom are disproportionately affected. The main stressors identified include the loss of place attachment, disruption of livelihood sources, loss of a sense of belonging, and threats to cultural and personal identity, particularly due to protracted displacement. Nearly all respondents reported heightened psychological distress, including confusion, fear, hopelessness, and trauma even before the actual displacement happened. In the urban context, this study argues that, for development projects to be genuinely inclusive and equitable, the government should adopt transparent and participatory decision-making processes. The government and policy makers should enforce fair, context-sensitive compensation; and integrate psychosocial support services into relocation plans. Failure to implement these measures may lead to deepening existing vulnerabilities; thereby undermining resilience and sustainability goals, and intensifying psychosocial effects among project-affected persons.

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