

Article

The Impact of Implementing Devolution on Citizen Participation and Service Provision in Sunningdale, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: In this paper we examine how devolution, as mandated by Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution, affects local governance, focusing on citizen participation and service delivery in Ward 10 of Sunningdale, Harare. Although devolution is enshrined in the Zimbabwean constitution, the actual implementation has been fraught with inconsistencies between policy and practice. Centralized decision-making has hindered local authorities from fully exercising their powers, limiting citizen engagement in governance and effective service provision. In this study we utilised an interpretive methodological approach to collect data through semi-structured interviews and online focus group discussions with local government officials, experts, and Sunningdale residents. The findings reveal a mixed understanding of devolution among residents, with most lacking access to information about its implications. Though residents expressed hope that devolution could improve services such as water provision and housing, political and institutional challenges continue to undermine its effective implementation. Local government experts suggest that successful devolution in Zimbabwe requires empowering local authorities with greater financial control and decision-making autonomy. The study highlights the importance of education and awareness programmes to enhance citizen understanding of devolution, as well as the need for a clear legislative framework to support the decentralization process. We conclude that while devolution holds promise for improving governance and service delivery, its success depends on political will, institutional capacity, and genuine citizen engagement.

Keywords: Citizen participation; decentralization; devolution; institutional challenges; local governance; service delivery

Introduction

In this paper we examine the impact of implementing devolution on citizen participation and service provision in Ward 10 of Sunningdale, Harare Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. The significance of this study lies in understanding how the devolution of governmental powers affects citizens across various governance and administrative structures. By analysing the current state of devolution in Zimbabwe, its influence on citizen engagement in Sunningdale, and the tangible benefits that may arise from a devolved governance system, the study aims to shed light on this critical aspect of governance. Devolution represents a multi-level governance approach, yet its implementation in Zimbabwe remains contentious as viewed by citizens, policymakers, and scholars. Currently, service provision and citizen participation are largely centralized, relegating local authorities and citizens to peripheral roles in decision-making. Despite the constitution supporting devolution and decentralization in Zimbabwe's governance system, inconsistencies between policy and practice persist.

Jonga (2014) emphasizes the need for political commitment and resources to translate written policies into actionable programmes.

The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe mandates the devolution of power to lower tiers of government, highlighting this as a foundational principle of the state. However, civil society organisations, opposition political parties, and international agencies have raised concerns about the government's failure to implement devolution effectively (Muchadenyika & Williams, 2018). The need for implementing devolution is driven by the recognition that existing social inequalities necessitate a more devolved governance structure to enhance citizen participation (Mugabi, 2004). Consequently, devolution is perceived as a long-term solution to address the unequal distribution of resources and poor local governance (Treisman, 2000). The purpose of this paper is therefore to provide a platform to contribute to the broader discourse on devolution and local governance by examining the specific case of Ward 10 in Sunningdale, Harare Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. Through an analysis of the impact of devolution on citizen participation and service provision, the paper aims to provide empirical evidence that can help inform policy discussions and contribute to a better understanding of the potential benefits and challenges of devolved governance systems in more or less similar contexts.

Literature Review

Muchadenyika and Williams (2018) argue that the Zimbabwean government has centralized power due to fears of opposition parties gaining control over urban centres, as observed in other African nations. Currently the structure of the devolved state envisioned by the constitution remains unclear. However, prior to the 30 July 2018 elections, the ruling ZANU PF party assured citizens that local authorities would gain more functions and decision-making power to enhance participation. However, historical concerns persist regarding the equitable distribution of locally available natural resources among Zimbabwe's provinces (ActionAid, 2014).

While decentralization is expected to foster economic growth, social equality, and poverty alleviation, its practical benefits remain debated in many developing countries (Muringani et al., 2018). Citizens have faced setbacks in decision-making and access to government services, exacerbated by the central government's entrenched control over public affairs (Ncube et al., 2015). Makumbe (1998) describes Zimbabwe's decentralization as a system where the government delegates certain administrative functions to lower tiers while maintaining tight control over decision-making. This structure limits citizen involvement, resulting in a scenario where citizens receive services without meaningful participation in governance. Under the current delegated decentralization model, the Minister of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing exercises executive authority over urban and rural local authorities, approving most policy decisions (Jonga, 2014).

Despite laws granting local authorities some autonomy, they still remain largely subordinate to the Local Government Ministry, leading to ineffective governance and deteriorating service delivery (Kurebwa, 2015). Such challenges experienced with a centralized decision-making system are similar to what Moloto and Moeti (2023) considers as also having significantly hindered local authorities in Polokwane, South Africa from effectively managing water supply to local communities, reflecting a broader issue where local governance is constrained by higher-level political structures. In addition, Suwardi and Saad (2024) in a study of Public-Private Partnerships in Malaysia also acknowledged the challenges that are posed by political interventions on local authorities whilst also acknowledging the need for government support in unforeseen issues, such as land-related problems.

Local government in Zimbabwe transitioned from a statutory to a constitutional framework for the first time in 2013 (Mapuva, 2015). The 2013 Constitution envisions a three-tier government system based on cooperative governance to inform, consult, and harmonize matters of public interest (Moyo & Ncube, 2014). The legislative framework governing local authorities does not significantly empower them in financial management and policy making. For instance, the Public Finance Management Act mandates that council budgets require ministerial approval for implementation. Consequently, critical decisions regarding service provision are centralized, marginalizing citizen involvement. Zimbabwe's experience with decentralization from 2013 is like Sudan's from 1969, where vested political and religious interests have impeded the full implementation of devolution. These interests along with regional and geographical divisions, were major drivers of Sudan's decentralization agenda, where most decisions were centralized in Khartoum (Rondinelli,

1981). Devolving responsibilities for development planning and administration aimed to increase citizen participation. Similarly, Zimbabwe's devolution efforts have been hindered by weak institutions, lack of political will, and lack of clarity on devolution's meaning and expected outcomes.

Existing literature on devolution and governance in Zimbabwe such as the works of Chigiya-Mujeni (2021), Taruvinga (2023), and Mudau and Nyane (2022), highlights several critical gaps that this study seeks to address. A predominant focus of earlier studies has been the institutional and politico-legal barriers to implementing constitutional devolution frameworks. For instance, Chigiya-Mujeni (2021) point out the structural challenges such as centralized control, inadequate financial allocations, and weak institutional capacities that hinder effective governance. Similarly, Taruvinga's (2023) insights into the politicization of local governments reveals how Zimbabwe's political landscape, historically characterized by fear of losing power and entrenched partisanship, curtails the potential of devolution. However, these studies often lack a localized and community-specific focus that provides granular insights into the lived experiences of citizens under centralized governance. While Taruvinga (2023) examines broader political dynamics and their implications, and Mudau and Nyane (2022) critically assess constitutional non-implementation, they do not thoroughly explore the intersection between these governance challenges and public participation in service delivery at the ward level.

This study therefore aims to bridge this gap by providing empirical evidence from a specific local context namely Ward 10 in Sunningdale, Harare to understand the implications of devolution on citizen engagement and service delivery. By focusing on the dynamic interaction between centralized decision-making, resource allocation, and grassroots participation, this study not only expands the discourse but also proposes innovative governance models. These models aim to bolster institutional capacity and enhance equitable resource distribution while fostering citizen trust. Therefore, this work should be regarded as contributing to the broader narrative by emphasizing the urgent need for aligning constitutional mandates with practical governance reforms to achieve transformative and participatory local governance in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

An interpretive methodological approach was employed to examine the complexities of devolution and citizen participation in Sunningdale. Such an approach, as argued by Myers (2000), facilitated a deep understanding of residents' lived experiences. Thematic analysis, following on from Creswell (1998), was used to identify and analyse key themes emerging from the data. This method allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research question as well as the generation of rich, contextualized findings. A representative group of Sunningdale residents was selected through purposive and convenient sampling procedures. Purposive sampling focused on choosing experts in the study's focus area as key informants (e.g. officials from Harare City Council and local government experts) for in-depth analysis, as these individuals were considered information-rich cases. These key informants were crucial in answering questions and providing clarification on the processes and legal provisions related to devolution. Convenient sampling was used to choose the 19 study participants. This type of non-probability sampling proved useful in identifying members of the target population based on criteria such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or willingness to participate in the study. The residents of Sunningdale were identified through the structures of the Harare Residents' Trust (HRT), a community-based organisation with structures in Harare, Chitungwiza, Epworth, and Ruwa.

Semi-structured interviews and online Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used as data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews, which blended both closed and open-ended questions, were conducted conversationally with 1 informant at a time. These interviews were held with 7 key informants from the local government, 2 officials from the City of Harare, and 19 residents from Ward 10 in the Sunningdale high-density suburb. Additionally, an FGD was established on the WhatsApp messaging platform with those informants who had participated in the semi-structured interviews. The FGDs on WhatsApp were particularly useful in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown regulations in place in Zimbabwe at the time of fieldwork as it was not possible to physically meet with study informants. The focus group consisted of 19 informants (12 women and 7 men), all of whom were residents of Sunningdale.

The flexibility of using semi-structured interviews was evident as they allowed for probing and follow-up questions, giving participants the opportunity to explain or clarify their responses in more depth (Mack,

2005). This was crucial for this study, given the controversy surrounding the government's lack of will to implement devolution as enshrined in the constitution. Informants were sensitized about the research topic and assured of the confidentiality of the process. Although some participants initially expressed reservations and fears about participating in what they viewed as a controversial topic, they were assured of their safety and the privacy of their contributions. These fears were primarily due to the partisan political lens through which devolution has been viewed in the Zimbabwean context. The participants exhibited a diverse educational background. Of the 19 informants, 3 held Ordinary Level (O' Level) certificates, 4 possessed Advanced Level (A' Level) qualifications, 5 had diplomas, and 5 held university degrees.

The Findings

1. Informants' Perceptions of Devolution in Zimbabwe: Awareness, Understanding, and Educational Needs
Informants expressed mixed perceptions of devolution as outlined in the Zimbabwean constitution. While nearly all participants were aware of the concept, many were uncertain about its implementation. Residents of Sunningdale reported learning about devolution through political meetings, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) like the Crisis Coalition of Zimbabwe (CCZ), Harare Residents' Trust, and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), as well as through media channels. Most informants lacked copies of the Constitution and did not actively seek them out, viewing the document as difficult to access. Among the 19 residents who participated in the research, thirteen indicated they did not understand devolution and expressed a need to be educated on the topic. The remaining 6 participants demonstrated a better understanding but felt powerless to advocate for their needs and rights. Despite these differences, all participants agreed on the necessity of further awareness programmes regarding devolution, acknowledging that it involves the government transferring some of its powers to local authorities to improve social service delivery. Informants hoped that devolution would empower them to set budgets, prioritize development, and elect and recall their officials, while emphasizing the need for well-managed health and education facilities to benefit their community.

In contrast, local government experts interviewed displayed familiarity with the constitution and its devolution clause. However, a conflicted understanding emerged among participants, with some believing that devolution would enhance their oversight over council management and councillors. Local government officials suggested that residents should receive education on devolution to clarify misconceptions and build a better understanding. All participants agreed that devolution should be embraced as an effective governance model to empower local authorities and enhance accountability to citizens.

Empowered Local Governments and Community Involvement: A Path to Effective Devolution in Zimbabwe

Key informants were asked about the nature of devolution envisioned by participants. A town planning expert and a local government consultant, both experienced in working with the City of Harare, emphasized the necessity of initiating devolution at the local level. They stressed the importance of local-level budgeting, which begins with identifying funding areas and devolving financial control, including procurement, to residents. This approach would empower residents to manage local issues, such as potholes, more effectively by allowing them to prioritize roads, select contractors, and monitor progress rather than relying on local authority officials who may have differing priorities. The town planning expert noted the difficulty in defining what a "typical devolution" is, as countries implementing devolution reforms develop structures and processes tailored to their specific contexts. Zimbabwe is no exception; thus, the form of devolution should align with local needs and conditions. He stated,

"The expectation is one of a relatively more open process of defining the devolution we implement. We should lean more towards empowered local governments, free from national government interference, particularly in rural areas, while the national government focuses on policy making, standard setting, and capacity development for sub-national tiers. The political aspirations of current leaders are shaped by intense competition for power, complicating our efforts to devolve within a culture that favours centralization over devolution."

(Informant, Town Planning Expert)

It was further noted that the anticipated devolution in Zimbabwe should be distinct from deconcentration and delegation. Another expert highlighted that Chapter 14 of the Zimbabwean Constitution provides for the transfer of power, responsibilities, and resources from central government to provincial and local governments. Although the Constitution does not explicitly define “devolution”, its meaning should be interpreted in its ordinary context, implying that provisions must relate to funding for lower tiers of government. Given that local authorities in Zimbabwe currently possess revenue-generating powers beyond government allocations, new revenue streams should be established. The expert emphasized that the law must mandate resident consultation on policy matters and service delivery.

Another local government expert envisioned a devolution model where provincial and local governments would take over services currently provided by the central government, with necessary funds allocated to devolved tiers. He stated,

“For example, services like birth and death registration, road administration, vehicle licensing, and water supply management could be managed at the local level. Each ward or suburb could receive its allocation and decide how to utilize it. If implemented, this devolution would foster unity and trust between local and national governments while preventing the central government from overstepping its bounds and reducing bureaucracy.”

(Informant, Local Government Expert)

Enhancing Citizen Participation and Accountability through Devolution in Zimbabwe Residents’ Perspectives
Residents of Sunningdale expressed diverse expectations regarding the implementation of devolution. One such resident, Mainesi Bhello (43) anticipated that devolution would address housing challenges, highlighting that many vulnerable residents lost their houses to the Harare City Council due to ignorance about secure housing tenure. She knew several residents in Sunningdale and Mbare who had lost their homes due to a lack of understanding of ownership and inheritance laws. Another resident, Weston Kasiyandima (39) expected a governance system that genuinely cared for citizens’ welfare without any form of discrimination. Matiyenga (46) hoped that devolution would respond to service delivery challenges, particularly the provision of clean water. He said:

“I expect devolution to urgently solve the water challenge and to therefore have clean water. It is my right to have access to clean water. Areas of service delivery that I foresee being affected by the implementation of devolution are the housing department and sewer system, and replacement of old pipes, streetlights and bus termini.”

(Informant, Matiyenga, Male, 46 years old)

Patricia Masveni (43) expected a devolution strategy that established a clear relationship between central and local government, with local authorities playing a more significant role. She believed that councillors, who run local authorities and live in the neighbourhoods should have more power since they understand the specific needs of their areas and wards. Nyamupfukudza, another resident, emphasized that devolution has the potential to uplift living standards by guaranteeing the full participation of citizens in decision-making. He argued that residents should be allowed to freely and legally express their views to the council, which would help improve the suburb and represent citizens’ voices and grievances in the governance of local authorities. This could prevent issues like the demolition of illegal markets without dialogue between citizens and authorities. Matiyenga (46) believed that proper implementation of devolution would enhance citizen participation in the governance of local authorities, especially in the City of Harare. Informant Portia (housewife, 36 years old), concurred, stating “If done by the book, devolution will enhance the participation of citizens in the running of local authorities.”

There was consensus among residents that whatever form devolution takes in Zimbabwe, it would lead to improved livelihoods and strengthen citizen participation in local governance.

Experts' Insights

Local government experts agreed with residents' sentiments, noting that devolution would enhance citizen participation by allowing cities to make more substantive decisions and holding them accountable. Experts highlighted that devolution would address apathy in governance. One expert remarked:

"People are sick and tired of officials who think they are more powerful and important than the residents whom they serve." (Informant, Town Planning Expert)

This scenario has led many people to disengage from a corrupt and non-responsive council. Experts also noted the lack of a policy for participatory governance in policy making since Harare had centralized service delivery at the Head Office. They proposed that citizens must be educated about devolution and democracy at all levels of society, as empowered citizens can hold officials accountable.

2. Addressing Service Delivery Challenges through Devolution in Zimbabwe: Residents' Expectations and Government Motivations

Residents' Perspectives

A significant 80 percent of the residents interviewed asserted that the government of Zimbabwe must urgently address challenges in providing basic social services such as housing, water and sanitation, waste management, health, and education. These services directly impact people's lives, and most of the informants believed that the government should implement devolution to escape its financial obligations to local authorities. A resident (Matiyenga, Male, 46 years old) stated,

"If the government is serious about the implementation of devolution, they may want to consider how the local authorities should be funded so that they can provide essential services without fail." (FGD participant)

Expert Insights

A local government expert observed that the government seemed more focused on decentralizing services through delegation rather than genuine devolution. He suggested that central government was prioritizing provincial local economic development and easier access to official documents such as birth certificates and passports. However, he warned that after implementation, it might become evident that the objectives of the government and the residents diverge significantly. Another key expert highlighted that the primary driver for devolution was public demand, stemming from years of dissatisfaction with the current system. He provided a historical context, noting that the year 2000 constitution shaped the devolution model, and the period 2008-2009 made devolution more imperative. During these times, both citizens and political elites recognized that institutional reforms implied in a fully devolved system were crucial for Zimbabwe's socio-economic well-being and political stability. He argued:

"Political elites naturally expect retention of control of the levers of state power since currently state power is not, in terms of popular perception and development outcomes, being used to advance equitable development and transparent government. Political elites, especially in ZANU PF, interpret reform aspirations contained in devolution as 'opposition to their leadership.'"

(Informant, Local Government Expert Two)

The expert further explained that the government's motivation to embrace devolution was driven by the objectives of Section 264 (2) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the desire to improve service delivery, which has deteriorated to unacceptable levels. Devolution aimed to ensure the equitable sharing of resources and development across all provinces, addressing long-standing concerns about marginalization. By bringing peace and harmony, devolution is intended to enhance democratic principles by ensuring that governmental power is closer to the people. The local government expert concluded, "Within the Zimbabwe context, the need to ensure equitable development and sharing of resources in the various provinces is recognized and incorporated into the constitution."

The Necessity of Devolution In The Running of Local Authorities

Despite limited understanding of devolution, residents largely agreed that it was necessary to enhance citizens' agency and full participation in the life of their local authorities. Elizabeth Nyamupfukudza, one resident, expressed that devolution would give them the opportunity to fully participate in decision-making within their community. Taurayi Matiyenga argued that devolution is necessary because it provides citizens with better standards and quality of service delivery, promoting competition in city development. Another female informant noted that devolution was necessary to address several service delivery challenges affecting local authorities and citizens. However, she expressed concerns about the challenges in communicating their issues across. She believed that devolution would improve citizen participation because local authorities would seek input directly from the people.

Local government experts agreed that devolution should be implemented urgently as it is key to making local government accountable for its decisions. One key informant noted that local authorities are closer to the people than central government, making it easier to hold councils accountable. They also highlighted that service delivery failures often lead to accusations and counter accusations between central government and local authorities. Devolution would ensure that local authorities receive a fair share of government revenues, as stipulated in Section 301 of the Constitution, which can only be fairly implemented with the necessary laws and formulas. Another expert emphasized that devolution would ultimately eliminate bureaucracy, as it encourages communities to work together, promoting competition among different wards and local authorities to do the best for their people. Local Government Expert Three stated, "Since devolution encourages communities to work hard together as each ward eats what it kills, thereby promoting competition to do the best for the people among the different wards and local authorities."

Promises and Pitfalls of Devolution: Experts' Opinions on Implementing Devolution in Zimbabwe

Experts believe that the implementation of devolution in Zimbabwe promises improved service delivery, accountable councils, reduced corruption, and a stronger sense of belonging within communities. One key expert highlighted that devolution would lead to more accountability, transparency, inclusivity, better financial management, more consultations, and inclusive planning. However, the expert also cautioned that devolution might result in a bloated bureaucracy. Another expert predicted increased tension between the central government, controlled by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and local governments controlled by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This tension could result in less attention being given to the Metropolitan provinces by larger councils like Harare and Bulawayo. Experts warned that a significant portion of the provincial budget could be wasted on administering the Metropolitan council instead of directly improving service delivery. Additionally, the involvement of Members of Parliament in local councils could distort the principle of parliamentary oversight.

The implementation of devolution might also become an added expense for the central government, particularly concerning the funding of the Metropolitan council as an additional structure. Another concern is the potential revenue sharing between local and metropolitan tiers, which could disadvantage service delivery units. Experts emphasized the need for clear delineation of functions and duties between local authorities and the Metropolitan council to avoid duplication of roles. Despite these challenges, some experts see significant benefits from devolution. It would allow citizens to claim their rights and improve health standards. Devolution is also expected to unlock the potential of communities by enabling the equitable distribution of resources, especially to regions that have been marginalized for decades. However, there is a risk of creating "decentralized authoritarianism," where local policymakers and bureaucrats become too powerful and unaccountable to the citizenry.

Political Discord and Devolution: Challenges Facing Urban Councils in Zimbabwe

Some informants perceive urban councils in Zimbabwe as political hotbeds where the implementation of devolution will remain a contentious issue for the foreseeable future. This situation arises from the central government's control by ZANU-PF, while the opposition, primarily the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), dominates the councils. This political discord hampers development programmes, disadvantaging residents. One informant noted,

“The opposition controls urban councils, so the central government sometimes sabotages the council for political reasons. Therefore, devolution is the way to go. The challenge for Harare province is that it is a political hotbed, being both the seat of central government and the opposition’s stronghold, complicating the issue further.”

(FGD participant, Takunda, Male, 34 years old)

The informant also highlighted the significant challenge posed by entrenched officials collaborating with land barons to illegally parcel out wetlands, leading to houses being constructed over sewer lines or under electricity poles, which creates serious health and safety risks. Additionally, the potential for secession could emerge from implementing devolution, further complicating the political landscape. Those in power often find it difficult to relinquish their influential positions, as devolution could empower newly devolved local authorities to address past grievances, particularly corruption, potentially resulting in increased chaos.

Significance of Local Government in Service Provision in Harare

Participants generally agreed that local government is the tier closest to the people, making it more visible and relevant to the community. One expert suggested that a more appropriate framing would be local government being responsible for social services, education, health, and social protection. Local Government Expert 4 emphasized that local governments should represent the communities themselves, stating, “When Minister Ignatius Chombo popularized the conceptualization of local governments as service delivery institutions, a minimalist perspective took hold, leading citizens to see themselves as separate from councils, which has resulted in negative development outcomes.”

Another participant highlighted the importance of social services as a crucial component of social development. She stressed the need for adequate provisions for social services, such as sports and recreation facilities, counselling, and empowerment projects, which are key functions of local authorities. She remarked,

“In low-income areas, council social services are often the only option available to citizens. These services are typically underfunded, receiving minimal allocations during budgeting. It is essential to ensure that social services are adequately funded through citizen participation in budget preparation. In some cases, social services, especially in sports, can develop into lucrative careers.”

(FGD participant, Ncube, Female 33 years old)

Another expert, Musekiwa, noted that local authorities are best positioned to interact with citizens through their representatives, particularly councillors.

Recommendations for Improving Citizen Participation in Devolution Implementation

Informant Nyamupfukudza a female of 32 years old emphasized the need for residents to gain more knowledge and information about devolution. She highlighted the importance of allowing residents to engage with those leading the devolution programme to express their priorities. She stated, “We want the opportunity to engage with the leaders implementing devolution so we can communicate what we value most in its implementation.” Matiyenga advocated for the enactment of a devolution law consistent with the 2013 Constitution to meet citizens’ expectations. He urged the government to provide targeted training for councillors to help them understand their roles before making policy decisions. He also suggested the need for a law requiring political parties and independent candidates to complete detailed questionnaires about their suitability for public office, including asset declarations and community knowledge. This measure would protect the office of the councillor and ensure the selection of competent and honest policymakers. Patricia Masveni recommended that local authorities be empowered to utilize the revenue they collect to enhance service delivery, given their proximity to local communities. She argued that local authorities are better positioned to understand the specific development and budget priorities for each area than central government.

Discussion

1. Understanding Devolution

The findings reveal a general awareness of devolution among informants, acquired through diverse mediums such as media, civil society-organized community meetings, and engagement with local councillors. However, informants demonstrated limited understanding of devolution's scope and mechanisms, aligning with Rondinelli's (1981) assertion that the intricacies of devolution require structured education to foster public comprehension. This is consistent with Kurebwa's (2015) observations that devolution remains a concept more familiar to academics and government officials than the general public, hence the need for educating citizens on this concept.

One major challenge identified is the lack of a precise definition of devolution within Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution as observed by Hussein (2006) and Smoke et al. (2013), who highlight the importance of clear legislative frameworks for effective governance. For example, informant Ncube, a 33-year-old female, aptly noted, "An Act of Parliament should specify the extent of powers to be devolved to provincial, metropolitan, and local authorities." This ambiguity in the Constitution has led to differing interpretations by central government authorities, hindering cohesive implementation. These findings build upon Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which emphasizes the interplay between agency and structure, highlighting how undefined legal frameworks constrain both institutional and individual agency.

This study also addresses gaps identified by Chigiya-Mujeni (2021), Mudau and Nyane (2022) and Tarvinga (2023). While these scholars focus on institutional and politico-legal challenges such as centralization, inadequate financial allocations, and weak institutional capacities, they often neglect localized experiences of governance. By focusing on Ward 10, Sunningdale, Harare, this study highlights community-specific realities, including calls for greater public awareness and transparency in governance processes.

2. Service Provision Under Devolution

Informants exhibited mixed views on the impact of devolution on service delivery. Local government experts and informants alike noted that devolved governance should ideally enhance transparency, resource allocation, and service delivery. However, practical challenges remain, with informants frequently citing a lack of citizen participation in budgeting and service oversight. As Muringani et al. (2018) and Smoke et al. (2013) emphasize, devolution's success depends on institutional capacity and a clear delineation of responsibilities, which remain elusive in Zimbabwe's current governance framework.

This ambiguity aligns with Yuliani's (2004) view that poorly defined devolution models result in institutional inefficiencies, while Rodden (2004) highlights the need for fiscal decentralization mechanisms to ensure effective service delivery. Informants in this study also echoed the sentiments of Muchadenyika (2017), emphasizing that incomplete or ambiguous definitions of governance processes within legislative frameworks perpetuate uneven resource distribution and limited local government agency. Furthermore, local government experts shared optimism about devolution fostering grassroots participation in decision-making. However, this contrasts with the reality reported by informants, who feel excluded from significant governance processes. This divergence is concerning as Sims (2013) cautions that devolution, while empowering in theory, risks transferring inefficiencies from central to local levels without adequate capacity building.

3. Devolution and Citizen Freedoms

Ideally effective devolution necessitates dismantling centralized decision-making structures to enhance citizen agency and participation in governance. Informants consistently highlighted a lack of transparency in Harare City Council's operations, particularly in budgeting, which limited their ability to influence decision-making. This finding resonates with Sen's (1999) capabilities approach, emphasizing that individual freedom is critical for achieving developmental outcomes. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital further supports this analysis. Consequently, strengthening social networks, along with education on governance processes, fosters greater public participation. This study therefore advocates for the role of local government experts, supported by Hussein (2006), and Smoke et al. (2013), in initiating awareness campaigns and training programs to equip citizens with the knowledge needed to navigate governance systems. As emphasized by Muringani et al. (2018), effective devolution demands active citizen engagement backed by robust institutional frameworks.

4. Bridging Governance Gaps at the Local Level

By situating this study in Ward 10, Sunningdale, Harare, it addresses the need for localized and context-specific analyses identified in the works of Chigiya-Mujeni (2021) and Kurebwa (2015). The study highlights that achieving equitable resource distribution and fostering citizen trust requires a departure from centralized governance models. Instead, innovative governance approaches that balance centralized oversight with decentralized autonomy are necessary. Informants and local government experts alike advocated for capacity building within local authorities to address service delivery gaps, aligning with observations by Chirisa et al. (2013), Kurebwa (2015), and Muchadenyika and Williams (2018). These findings highlight that fostering participation in budgetary processes is not only a legislative requirement but also a means to achieve transformative and participatory governance. Rodden's (2004) emphasis on fiscal autonomy and equitable resource allocation provides a further theoretical basis for recommending governance reforms aligned with constitutional mandates.

Conclusion

While devolution is a complex concept, its implementation has the potential to enhance citizen participation and decision-making. Citizen engagement requires social capital and the ability to leverage social networks to raise issues with service providers and policymakers. The capabilities approach emphasizes individual agency and freedoms, which are often constrained by central government bureaucrats who are often solely focused on retaining power. There is no doubt that citizen participation flourishes in an environment where freedoms are recognized and respected. The study demonstrated that while devolution offers more benefits than drawbacks, it requires an enabling policy environment to realize its full potential. Future research could focus on assessing the quality of local government as a determinant of successful devolution implementation in Zimbabwe.

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