

Local Government, Decentralisation, Devolution, and Service Delivery in Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe is one of only a handful of countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have taken part in the wave of decentralization and devolution. The process differs from the efforts of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in that this time the government of Zimbabwe seems ready to relinquish genuine power to the subordinate levels. Devolution of power is enshrined in Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution as one of the country's founding values and principles. However, as was the case with in the 2000s, it is sometimes easy to romanticize about the benefits of devolution and fail to take into account the detailed work required before it benefits people at the local level. The devolved administrations exercise considerable autonomy when it comes to tackling poverty: for instance, major areas of economic development, education, health and housing policy are the responsibility of the devolved institutions.

This paper seeks to address the following questions: in what ways can devolution contribute to socio-economic and greater welfare of the people? What are the principles guiding decentralization and devolution? What are the ideal institutional frameworks for Provincial and Metropolitan Councils? How are these Councils going to raise and collect revenue? Will the devolution address the regional injustices and marginalization? Is there shared understanding of devolution in Zimbabwe? The paper is organized into five sections. First section provides the background and conceptual framework. Section two presents Zimbabwe's local government system focusing on the rationale, objectives and principles of devolution, innovations of the local government and planning as an instrument of social mobilization. Section three focuses on constraints on local governance such as lack of citizen consultations, unitary state, slow pace of legislation alignment, center-local relationships and violation of legislation among others. The fourth section covers solutions and recommendations such as assistance and support, public finance management system, politicization of local governance in Zimbabwe, civic culture creation and multi-stakeholder participation. The fifth section presents the future research directions. The last section provides a conclusion.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Decentralization and Devolution

Interest group politics suggest that politicians at the center have little wish to cede their vast powers, notably those over public finances, to the local level. They embark on meaningful local reforms, including decentralization and devolution, only when they sense authentic benefits to themselves and their

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political supporters from incorporating the local government into the mainstream political process, for example, when this gives them a political advantage over their competitors at the center or when, to generate welfare-enhancing growth, create broader markets (Zinyama, 2019; Chigwata, 2018) for urban-based industries or support the agricultural activities of the elite, it becomes necessary to liberalize the economy as well as domestic politics.

Decentralization is a generic term for the diffusion of governmental authority and power away from the national center to other institutions at other levels of government or levels of administration (Moyo and Ncube, 2014). Devolution is generally classified as the most extensive form of decentralization that diffuses substantial governmental powers, authority, responsibilities and resources to local units. Such units exercise a measure of autonomy, which is “the extent to which local governments have discretion in carrying out their duties and obligations” (Masunungure and Ndoma, 2013; Chigwata, 2019). However, such autonomy cannot be equated to the independence enjoyed by a sovereign State, given that local units exercising devolved powers are not at par with the central government. Unlike federal systems where the regions or provinces maintain their own independent power and cede or receive some authority to or from the federal government, devolved units do not occupy the same sort of position in relation to the central government (Chigwata, 2019). The dimensions of devolution include centralization, administrative, fiscal, political, delegation and deconcentration (Barnett, et al. 1977; Poverty Reduction Forum Trust, 2019). Devolution aims to create local governments that are independent, autonomous and usually have exclusive authority over explicitly defined functions. Political autonomy is meaningless if it is not accompanied by fiscal autonomy, which entails the ability to raise and spend revenue (Moyo, 2013; Chigwata, 2018).

ZIMBABWE’S LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

Local government is recognized in Zimbabwe as an important tier or sphere of government closest to the people, capable of providing a participatory and accountable style of governance for local communities (Zinyama, 2019, Chigwata, 2018; Moyo, 2013). It helps to provide service provision to communities in an equitable and sustainable manner. Chapter 14 of the Zimbabwe Constitution (2013) provides the framework for devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities in Section 264. Likewise, in Section 5 of the Constitution, the tiers of government provided are the national government; provincial and metropolitan councils; and local authorities. Since the adoption of the 2013 Constitution, the government has not yet crafted legislation to devolve power to Provincial and Metropolitan Councils.

Sections 268 and 269 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe establish Provincial Councils and Metropolitan Councils respectively. The Provincial and Metropolitan Councils are a middle and critical link between government and citizens.

Section 270 of the Constitution requires Provincial and Metropolitan Councils to undertake social and economic development in their respective provinces, including:

- planning and implementing social and economic development activities in its province;
- coordinating and implementing governmental programs in its province;
- planning and implementing measures for the conservation, improvement and management of natural resources in its province;
- promoting tourism in its province, and developing facilities for that purpose;
- monitoring and evaluating the use of resources in its province; and
- exercising any other functions, including legislative functions, that may be conferred or imposed on it by or under an Act of Parliament.

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