

## OVERCOMING A DECADE OF CRISIS: ZIMBABWE'S LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN TRANSITION

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### SUMMARY

The world's attention has focused on Zimbabwe as the country has moved from the turmoil of the 2008 elections to a tentative democratic transition under the current Inclusive Government. The country's newly elected local authorities and an apparent interest in decentralization have been largely ignored in the process, however. This essay thus provides an extensive, survey-based examination of local governance in Zimbabwe as of 2009. Four areas are discussed. First, with the growth of the political opposition to the ruling regime, local governance has also suffered from the deep polarization among all the country's institutions. The inexperience of the new local councilors vis-à-vis local administration officials also holds significant ramifications. Second, although local officials believe that public participation in decision-making is strong, citizen involvement is actually quite weak. Third, reeling from the country's 2008 economic crisis, local authorities were operating as best as they could on minimal income and barely functioning in many areas. Financial transfers ended long ago; revenue generation remains poor. Finally, this essay captures the poor state of public services. Achievement of a national democratic consensus, decentralization that actually promotes democratic local governance and strengthening once-strong local institutional capacity will determine the future progress of local governance. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY WORDS—local government; Zimbabwe; decentralization; Africa; democratic transition; service delivery; public participation

### INTRODUCTION

The crisis of democracy and development in Zimbabwe has been a subject of world concern for more than a decade. By the end of the 2000s, the country, once considered in many ways a model for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, was suffering through unbridled socioeconomic and political deterioration. Under the regime led by President Robert Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, which is best described as a militarized version of electoral authoritarianism, Zimbabwe faced political conflict, international isolation, and high and rising levels of poverty and disease (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011; Schelder, 2006). By 2008, hyperinflation produced economic collapse. Formal employment was a mere 7% *before* the collapse; the HIV/AIDS rate was among the highest in Africa; and a cholera outbreak demonstrated the deplorable state of public services.

Following the violence-marred elections of 2008, however, a window of opportunity for change tentatively opened. By September of that year, the Mugabe regime and political opposition signed the Global Political Agreement (GPA), a controversial accord in which the parties to the election agreed to share the power to govern. The GPA, which provides for constitutional reform as well as other measures considered essential for restoring democratic institutions, took effect in February 2009. Mugabe retained the presidency; Morgan Tsvangirai, a leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), became prime minister; and the ministerial posts were divided evenly among ZANU-PF and the two opposition MDC parties<sup>1</sup> Zimbabwe's current Inclusive Government

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<sup>1</sup>The MDC had split in 2005, and both parties contested the 2008 elections. The party led by Tsvangirai (MDC-T) is by far the largest; the smaller MDC-M is led by Arthur Mutambara.

was born. As of this writing, implementation of the GPA has proven difficult and has been delayed for months. ZANU-PF has resisted change, and the parties to the accord have disagreed over the nature and timing of constitutional reform and new elections.

Two important events related to local government also occurred in 2008. First, the March elections were “harmonized.” Voters cast their ballots for all presidential, parliamentary, and local electoral posts in a single day for the first time ever. As national leaders were contesting the discredited second round of the presidential vote and negotiated the GPA, newly elected councilors—most of whom had never held local office—were contemplating their new positions as local representatives of their respective wards. They faced the high expectations of a population seeking relief from political and economic turmoil.

The second important event was the GPA. Incorporated into the accord was “Annexure B”—a draft constitutional reform that included a short, three-part chapter dedicated to the institutions of local government. It refers to the coordination of decentralization, provision of adequate local finance and resources, and legally defined authorities of elected councils. Considering there has never been any constitutional protection of local government, this was a significant development.

Recent experience in Africa does not allow one confidence in the prospects for such reform in Zimbabwe (Bland, 2011; Olowu, 2003; Smoke, 2003). Yet, there is broad recognition of the importance, particularly in transitional settings such as Zimbabwe, of decentralization that promotes responsive, participatory, and effective local governance (Olowu, 2003; Ribot, 2003). Although as of this writing, it is difficult to envision Zimbabwe's path toward that goal; the foundation for future reform lies in a good understanding of the local and intergovernmental system today. This essay seeks to highlight the nature and status of Zimbabwe's local government system during this turbulent time of transition and to provide much-needed insight into the multiple, inter-related challenges local officials face in the post-crisis period. It focuses on what is required for the local regime to recover and to contribute to the broader recovery of the country. This study is based on research conducted in May and June of 2009, a few months after the GPA was inaugurated.<sup>2</sup> It draws from surveys of 256 local elected and administration officials from a 15 selected local authorities.

## LOCAL AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL POLITICS

Two constants have characterized local governance in Zimbabwe from the start of the century, essentially since the opposition MDC was founded in 1999 by a coalition of trade union leaders, lawyers, and civic associations. First, the MDC has consistently drawn on this urban base of support in local as well as national elections. From 2000 onward, elections were convened in separate votes for the two local legislative bodies: for urban councils (UC), including direct votes for mayors (a provision rescinded in 2007) and for rural district councils (RDC). The MDC has easily won the mayor's offices and UCs in most cities, in Harare and Bulawayo in particular, to the consternation of the Mugabe-led regime. In 2008, the MDC won every urban council except one. Second, ZANU-PF has traditionally been strong in rural areas, where most of the Zimbabwean population is still located, winning the RDC seats by large margins. Even that support dropped significantly in 2008; however, the number of MDC rural council seats now almost equals ZANU-PF's.

The second constant over the past decade has been the polarization of the relationship between urban authorities controlled by the MDC and the central government led by the ruling party. Long determined to establish a one-party state, the Mugabe regime has reacted harshly and at times violently to any threat to its political dominance (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011, 24–25). As the MDC began to win parliamentary elections and then the urban centers in 2000, a strong reaction from the local government minister, a ZANU-PF stalwart, was inevitable: the MDC authorities were not to succeed. Opposition urban authorities, for their part, pushed for increased autonomy and made demands for restitution of funds and redress of other grievances. They fought the perceived illegal

<sup>2</sup>Each survey included 31 questions, both closed and open-ended, and the sample was chosen non-randomly to ensure demographic, geographic, and political diversity. For the purposes of a blinded review, information about the research team, sponsors, and author will be provided later as needed.

intervention of the Ministry of Local Government and Urban Development (MLG) in their localities. The MLG, meanwhile, attempted to co-opt or restrict local room to maneuver in a variety of ways, most notably, threatening to suspend and actually suspending defiant councils for alleged incompetence or corruption (Kamete, 2006). Increased centralization within an increasingly authoritarian regime was the overriding feature of intergovernmental life.

Zimbabwe's current system of local government was effectively established in 1993, when the first local assembly elections were held for the RDCs under the newly unified system of rural territorial administration (Schou, 2000, 125). The Rural District Councils Act (RDCA), which has been revised a number of times since 1988, governs the 60 councils in rural areas. The 31 UCs are subject to the provisions of the Urban Councils Act (UCA), which was promulgated at the end of 1995. The UCA governs the four types of local government found in urban areas around the country.

Local authorities in Zimbabwe hold a considerable degree of formal authority, which can—if actually practiced—provide the foundation for a decentralized local system (Bland, 2011; Smoke, 2003). Politically, councilors are the elected representatives of their respective wards. Administratively, the RDCA and UCA each list more than 50 separate services subject to council provision, including a number of revenue-generating business activities, and the councils engage in services that range from providing potable water and health clinics to protecting the environment and public security. Financially, local authorities legally have access to a variety of revenue sources. In practice, however, local autonomy is actually restricted in a multitude of ways by other laws and central government action. Because the constitution does not provide for a local government system, local authorities derive their authority from and are subject to the dictates of the MLG. Local initiatives subject to central approval include the annual budget, any revenue-raising initiative, by-laws and council resolutions, and the hiring and firing of senior staff. The MLG can investigate councils and act against them on virtually any matter. Indeed, even though local councils are popularly elected, it is more accurate to view local authorities as deconcentrated entities of the MLG rather than as autonomous local governments. Local elected officials essentially report to the MLG, and so they must be attuned to central ministry decision makers in Harare at least as much as to the local constituencies they were elected to represent. A common complaint of MDC officials and a few ZANU-PF local officials was the control that MLG exercises over them, including the appointment of special council members without consultation. One town clerk in a ZANU-PF local authority likened the MLG relationship with the MDC to a “rider and a horse, respectively”—the local authority being the latter.<sup>3</sup>

The councilors, who now choose a mayor from among their group, serve on council committees to set policy.<sup>4</sup> The town clerk (also the Chief Executive Officer, or CEO), who cannot be hired and fired without the minister's approval, is the local administrative link to the MLG. He or she—as opposed to the mayor—is now charged with executing the decisions of the council and ensuring compliance with procedures for the good functioning of the authority. The 2007 legislation, apparently supported by ZANU-PF and MDC, to convert the directly elected mayor into a part-time ceremonial position, as had been the case prior to 1995, was a significant reform of which local officials are generally well aware (Local Government Laws Amendment Bill, 2007). For those concerned with local autonomy and constituent accountability, this change was a major setback.<sup>5</sup> For those focused on administrative effectiveness, the move was seen as a positive one as it puts executive decision-making in the hands of the more technocratic.

The polarization between the MDC in the localities and the MLG continues to predominate today, as illustrated in Table 1. Whereas 35.9% of the councilors in the ZANU-PF local authorities had an excellent or good opinion of council relations with the ZANU-PF MLG, only 15.2% of the MDC local authorities held this opinion. On the contrary, slightly more than three-quarters of the councilors in the MDC local authorities viewed the relationship with the MLG as either “fair” or “poor.” More than half of the councilors (56.2%) in the ZANU-PF local authorities

<sup>3</sup>Interview, June 11, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Mayors pertain only to urban councils. In rural councils, a chairperson has always headed the council.

<sup>5</sup>The executive authority of the MDC mayors in all UCs was eliminated. The MLG had long pushed for this reform.

Table 1. Response to the question: How would you describe the council's relationship with the Ministry of Local Government and Urban Development (% of *N*)?

	Mayors		Councilors		Town clerks/officials	
	ZANU-PF ( <i>N</i> = 3)	MDC ( <i>N</i> = 11)	ZANU-PF LAs ( <i>N</i> = 64)	MDC LAs ( <i>N</i> = 164)	ZANU-PF LAs ( <i>N</i> = 3)	MDC LAs ( <i>N</i> = 12)
Excellent	0.0	0.0	3.1	1.2	33.3	0.0
Good	66.7	9.1	32.8	14.0	33.3	58.3
Fair	33.3	27.3	39.0	20.7	0.0	25.0
Poor	0.0	54.5	17.2	54.9	33.3	16.7
DK/NA	0.0	9.1	7.8	9.1	0.0	0.0

*N*, number of officials who provided their personal data; ZANU-PF, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front; MDC, Movement for Democratic Change.

Note: Party label signifies party with majority in local authority (LA), not individual affiliations. DK/NA, do not know or no answer; totals may not sum to 100% because of rounding off.

described their MLG relationship the same way, largely because they do not see the MLG providing assistance. Similar patterns are seen in the responses of the mayors and town clerks.

Reflecting the same oppositional politics, tension between the council and its own administrative staff can be high as well, where the MDC has a council majority. In many cases, councilors view the town clerk and administration as political opponents who have been hired by and are loyal to ZANU-PF. It is not unusual that administration officials, for their part, view MDC councils as acting on behalf of their party interests as opposed to the requirements of law or policy. When asked to evaluate the local authorities' relationship with the MLG, more than 71% of the mayors and nearly 69% of the councilors interviewed for the Zimbabwe study viewed the relationship as "fair" or "poor." Only 40% of the clerk and administration staff had the same view, whereas 60% of them considered the relationship to be "good" or "excellent."

The education level and professional experience of elected officials and administrative staff further explains the difficulties local institutions experience in attempting to effectively govern. As Table 2 shows, mayors (or chairpersons) and councilors have the least education of the four groups represented, a result that supports the concerns of many respondents (including officials themselves) about the ability of elected officials to effectively do their jobs. The town clerks are the best educated; as required by law, all had at least a university degree or college diploma/certificate. About one-fifth of the mayors and councilors had degrees or diplomas. Fourteen percent of the councilors had no more than a primary-school education. Notably, few local officials are female.

Figure 1 further illustrates the capacity challenge facing Zimbabwe's local authorities. A full 57% of the mayors and 78% of the councilors in the Zimbabwe study sample were serving in local office for the first time and had been for less than a year. Yet, the town clerks in the sample had been serving in their positions, remarkably, more than

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of mayors, councilors, and senior administration officials in sampled local authorities

Local official	Average age in years	Highest level of education achieved (% of <i>N</i> )				Female (as % of <i>N</i> )
		Primary school	High school and high school +	University degree or college diploma/certificate	Graduate school	
Mayors/chairs ( <i>N</i> = 14)	47.5	0 (0%)	8 (57%)	3 (21%)	1 (7%)	7.0%
Councilors ( <i>N</i> = 223)	45.6	32 (14%)	106 (48%)	44 (20%)	1 (0.01%)	15.0%
Town clerks/chief executive officers (CEOs) ( <i>N</i> = 12)	54.2	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	0.0%
Remaining administration officials ( <i>N</i> = 80)	44.1	0 (0%)	4 (0.05%)	49 (61%)	27 (34%)	19.0%

*N*, number of officials who provided their personal data

Note: In the age column, *N* was slightly lower because not all answered the age question.

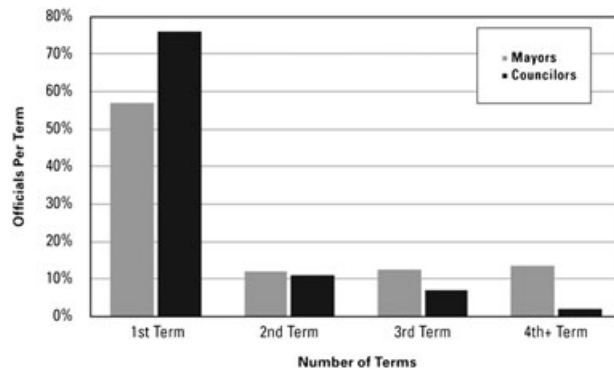


Figure 1. Current mayors' and councilors' experience in local authorities

17 years on average. The average length of service for other administrative staff was a little over 10 years, although, as many noted, the departure of many professionals among the millions who have fled Zimbabwe during the crisis has created critical staff shortages.

With limited experience, as well as less education, elected officials are at a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis the administrators with respect to the management of local affairs. This imbalance in education and experience between the elected officials, many of whom are now from the MDC, and the senior administrative staff, most of whom were appointed by the ZANU-PF minister of local government, further fuels the political tension within the local authority.

#### DEVELOPING PARTICIPATORY LOCAL GOVERNANCE?

Reflecting the highly personalistic politics of African societies, strong clientelism and patronage are defining features of Zimbabwean local governance (Jackson and Rosberg, 1984). Often working within politically polarized settings, Zimbabwe's elected officials' efforts reveal that they spend considerable time addressing individualistic requests of all types. These are personal petitions for a job, money for a family funeral, food, school placement, or any of a range of needs from people who are often in dire straits. Local officials do what they can to help but cannot always meet growing needs, especially given the difficult economic environment. Attending to them is, of course, a core means of building political support.

There is strong agreement among local officials on the frequency with which they receive these personal requests for specific items from local residents. Nine of the 15 groups of administration officials interviewed (60%) and 10 of the 14 mayors (71%) replied that councilors "often" receive such requests. Among the councilors—who represent wards located throughout their local jurisdictions, are more accessible, and are often the first to be sought out—65% responded that they often receive requests of this type. Several local officials noted that such requests come, as one administrator stated, "very often"—for "all kinds of requests [for] all kinds of assistance".<sup>6</sup>

Councilors, who serve as representatives from the wards in which they were elected, are in fact the primary actors when it comes to identifying and addressing the concerns of local residents. They essentially serve as intermediaries between citizens and the council and department heads. A large majority of councilors reported holding formal and informal meetings with community residents. Both mayors (64%) and administration officials, to a lesser extent (33%), recognized the councilor as the primary contact with the public, although other options—residents' associations, traditional leaders, ward development committees, and the council as a whole—are seen as other options for contacting the local authority.

<sup>6</sup>Interview, May 6, 2009.



Participatory governance involves, ideally, citizens and local associations who can readily and independently join in public decision-making on issues of individual and collective concern. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Zimbabwean local elected officials widely believe that citizen participation in affairs of the local authority is strong. When asked to describe public participation, 10 of the 14 mayors (71%) responded that it was “strong”—that citizens regularly participate in meetings and share their views. Some 65% of the councilors and 40% of the administration officials had the same view.

What Zimbabwean local officials actually mean by “participation” is the critical matter here, however. Many local officials tended to view any interaction with the public as participatory. An RDC chair reported that participation is strong, for example, because council meetings are open to all, and people share their views in them.<sup>7</sup> Other mayors and councilors viewed the criticism and complaints that come from residents as important examples of strong participation. Another primary reason for their “strong” response on citizen participation is that most local officials say they regularly consult with ward residents and with local associations on major issues, obtain their views, and act on them as they believe necessary. Consultation especially occurs each year with the preparation of the budget. Moreover, the MLG has reportedly required local officials to provide written evidence of their consultations with residents, such as the minutes of meetings, in order to have the budget approved.

Public participation in local affairs is actually weak. First, in practice, councilor meetings almost invariably involve only political party allies. MDC supporters attend MDC councilor meetings; ZANU-PF followers attend ZANU-PF meetings. The frequent polarization of council engagement with the public discourages general participation. As a former MDC city mayor pointed out, echoing the comments of other local officials, when he called a general meeting “zero,” ZANU-PF supporters showed up; others feared participating. If he called 5000 residents to review a budget or strategic plan, 10% might show up. People lose interest, he noted.<sup>8</sup> Local authorities interact with local civil society organizations, and associations of residents and ratepayers (taxpayers) are most commonly mentioned for their involvement in local affairs. Again, however, these groups can be highly politicized.

Second, participation is weak because the entire budget process is centered within the local authority. The prioritization of budget projects or activities is carried out, often in advance of consultations, entirely by the administration and council. To some local associations and councilors, the budget consultations are mere presentations of what has already been prepared; the process is not deliberative. In addition, local officials did not report that the public was involved in or monitoring budget execution. Third, the community associations surveyed take a dimmer view of local participation in the budget (more than half reported no involvement in the process). Nearly all of them indicated that the budget process was not transparent and that their role was at best reactive. When utilized, the quality of the process can often be poor or disorganized or politically divided. Residents complain that what is agreed to in the meetings turns out to be much different when the budget is finalized.

Finally, aside from the budget interaction and individual petitioning of councilors, citizen involvement in local affairs appeared highly restricted. Zimbabwean local authorities can turn to a variety of mechanisms for public consultation, including a bottom-up process defined in the RDCA, but they are not often used or used well. International donors have implemented programs to introduce participatory budgeting, but the long-term sustainability of these activities is unclear at best (Shall, 2007; 55–56; Sachikonye *et al.*, 2007, 218).

### LOCAL FINANCES: LOCAL OFFICIALS AS HAVE-NOTS

The financial situation that local authorities in Zimbabwe endured over the past decade, culminating as it did in 2008 with ruinous hyperinflation, was severe, and it surely remains difficult today. The national economic collapse left the local authorities essentially broke, and by 2009, they were very slowly emerging from rock bottom as

<sup>7</sup>Interview, May 5, 2009.

<sup>8</sup>Interview, May 4, 2009.

dollars under the new currency regime became available and a measure of stability appeared in the economy. “We need to be doing things by ourselves”, one MDC mayor frustrated by the scarcity of income explained, “but we simply can’t”.<sup>9</sup>

On a continent in which transfers are the predominant source of local government revenue, almost every local official surveyed reported that he or she had not received fiscal support from Harare for years (Olowu, 2003, 45). Meanwhile, communities’ incentives to pay taxes and fees for public services they were hardly receiving were crumbling along with the infrastructure; local businesses suffered, eliminating another revenue stream; and the general population’s ability to pay for anything was of course deeply affected by declining incomes and rising poverty. Local officials tend to base their rates and fees on what they think they need to accomplish and charge per unit, when they can. Often, what they actually charge—or collect—is nominal. “Our people do not have the capacity to pay,” declared an administration official in the small urban locality of Epworth, echoing many others.<sup>10</sup>

Local authorities have thus been forced to be creative in generating revenue, and they have received praises for revenue mobilization they have been able to achieve (Chikumbu *et al.*, 2006, 83). Both the UCA and RDCA include a series of revenue-mobilizing tools, including borrowing powers, although these are typically subject to MLG restrictions. UCs generate revenue through a variety of fees, rates, sales, and taxes, and their ability to set rate levels.

When asked about the sources of revenue, as seen in Table 3, the town clerks and other administration officials, who are closest to the finances, most often noted property taxes and related charges as most important. Licenses for businesses and vehicles were second in importance, and service fees were third. Local officials not infrequently mentioned the varied marketing or sales activities they engage in, which are referred to as “council projects.” They are engaged in the traditional liquor sales, for example, as well as sales of land, shops, and livestock. One respondent from a city administration cited “dividends from our company” as a source of income.

Local authorities, according to survey responses, were clearly not receiving appreciable funding from external sources. The most common external assistance, which was frequently mentioned, is material support (supplies, water treatment chemicals, equipment, pipes, etc.) from international NGOs and PVOs (private voluntary organizations). International development assistance to Zimbabwe is slowly returning since the GPA.

There is little doubt about the spending priorities of local authorities. With the resources they do have, local officials noted, they spend on three items: wages, general expenses, and infrastructure repair. Table 4 shows that all local officials, elected and otherwise, made it clear that this was the case. Salaries consume a large proportion of local authority income, especially as staff size remains fairly constant, and the proportion increases as the overall budget shrinks. Responses from the town clerks/CEOs and other administrative staff (the only officials who consistently provided figures) demonstrate that salary payments consume 28%–60% of their respective budgets.<sup>11</sup> Officials surveyed complained of the large staff expense, and a member of the parliament put the salaries in one large city at 90% of the budget.

Local officials are constantly concerned with infrastructure deterioration—roads and bridges in particular, as well as water and sanitation—and the need for repair. The availability of workable roads, as roads have been deteriorating for years, is obviously critical to local communities. Serious capital investment in infrastructure or anything else has been essentially non-existent; however, local officials are relying on stopgap measures to keep services running. Although they may budget for it, local authorities simply have not had the resources to begin or sustain any type of development project. When asked about the level of resources dedicated to capital projects, 25 of 29 mayors and administrative officials (86%) reported that it was either low (17) or non-existent (8). Almost all of them echoed a municipal mayor’s comment: “We are failing to do capital projects because of lack of financial resources.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Interview, May 7, 2009.

<sup>10</sup>Interview, May 26, 2009.

<sup>11</sup>One CEO from an RDC reported the salary level at 16% of the budget.

<sup>12</sup>Interview, June 1, 2009.

Table 3. What are the councils' three main sources of local revenue?

	Number of times mentioned among top three (% of <i>N</i> )				
	Property taxes and related charges	Licenses	Service fees	Development levies	Rentals
Mayors/chairs ( <i>N</i> = 14)	11 (78.6)	6 (42.9)	7 (50.0)	n.a	n.a
Administration officials ( <i>N</i> = 15)	13 (86.7)	10 (66.7)	8 (53.3)	n.a	n.a
Councilors ( <i>N</i> = 227)	n.a	154 (67.8)	n.a	182 (80.2)	169 (74.6)

*N*, total number of survey respondents

n.a., not applicable; issue was not mentioned among top three

Note: Administration officials, interviewed as a group, include the town clerks, heads of department, and others and vary by local authority.

Table 4. What are the three largest expenditures in the budget?

	Number of times mentioned among top three (% of <i>N</i> )			
	Wages	General expenses (incl. bills)	Infrastructure maintenance	Infrastructure construction
Mayors/chairs ( <i>N</i> = 14)	13 (92.9)	8 (72.7)	13 (92.9)	n.a
Administration officials ( <i>N</i> = 15)	15 (100.0)	11 (73.3)	12 (80.0)	n.a
Councilors ( <i>N</i> = 227)	203 (89.4)	166 (73.1)	n.a	116 (51.1)

*N*, total number of survey respondents

n.a., not applicable; issue was not mentioned among top three

Note: Some 86% of the councilors mentioned "other," which includes a variety of items.

### THE CRISIS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

Long ago the *raison d'être* of local authorities in Zimbabwe, public service delivery, promises to be fundamental to the renewal of the local government system, if not the country as a whole. The responsibilities that formally accorded local authorities in Zimbabwe are much broader than those accorded counterparts in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Wekwete, 1992, 98). Given the difficulties they have been facing for so long and the deterioration across multiple service areas, it bears considering what services the councils are actually providing today. Local authorities reported that they are involved, most importantly, in providing water and sanitation. Their responses undoubtedly reflect the outbreak of cholera, a water-borne disease, which claimed more than 4000 lives in 2008 and sadly demonstrated the dangers associated with the neglect of water and sewer systems.<sup>13</sup> Primary health care and road maintenance, respectively, were mentioned next in order of importance. These three plus refuse collection and education (helping manage schools) were considered by all local officials interviewed as the top five most important services they provided.

Yet, local officials made it clear that although they were providing water, health, and road repair, they were often well short of meeting needs and relying on financial support from some external source, usually an international NGO. In several instances, local officials replied that they were not providing any services because there was no money to pay for them. Support of any kind from the center was essentially non-existent (or indeed, MLG intervention can make life more difficult).

Zimbabwe's local authorities were trying to keep services functioning with scarce resources and limited institutional capacity. When asked to describe the general state of service delivery in their locality, local officials were in strong agreement: typically poor, fair at best. Administration officials, who are charged with overseeing services on a day-to-day basis, tended to be more optimistic; 80% reported services were "fair", whereas the rest

<sup>13</sup>United Nations estimates, as cited in Richards, *et al.* 2009a, 3.



reported they were poor. As Table 5 makes clear for five services, including the four that local authorities considered most important, the councilors reported that delivery is generally dismal. With the slight exception of health (72.0%), over three-fourths of the councilors rated each of these services as either “fair” or “poor.” More than half of the councilors considered roads and water and sanitation services “poor.” “Clean water in adequate quantities for domestic and industrial use”, according to the MDC Deputy Minister of local government, “was always available” in the past. Now, it is a “disaster” (Zvidzai, 2009, 3).

What specific challenges do local authorities face in attempting to meet service needs? Table 6 provides a list of the major problems, as reported by the councilors. The lack of financial resources tops the list, which one can assume helps explain most of the problems that follow. Nine of the 10 local officials mentioned lack of revenue among the top three. Local authorities are simply starved of the funding that is needed to sustain any service. Another core issue is equipment and machinery; nearly 90% of the local officials placed it among the top three problems. Their machines and equipment are typically in poor condition or inoperative, or they have been cannibalized so that something else can be put to use. Finding sufficient material stocks to keep services functioning—pipes, tanks, lights, and so on—is a serious problem. Housing space is limited and waiting lists are huge, giving rise to corruption. Construction in most places had ground to a halt. The lack of human resources, meanwhile, poses long-term capacity questions for the country’s local authorities.

Local officials at times seemed resigned to their fate, recognizing they could not make much progress without outside assistance, yet hopeful that things would improve. A lead administration official stated that his local authority had no cash flow: “We’re not a bankable organization at present,” he said.<sup>14</sup> Local officials reported many difficulties, and they repeatedly turned to donors, churches, “well-wishers,” and NGOs for support. The determined local official had to be entrepreneurial, networking with potential providers, civil society groups, donors, party leaders, ministries if possible, or with international aid organizations.

The survey also allowed us to delve into the problem of infrastructure and maintenance and its relevance to service provision. Local officials identified road disrepair as the most serious infrastructure issue, whereas they considered plant and equipment as the second most important. Water and sanitation was the third most frequently mentioned. In fact, water supply and sanitation service in many areas is running at 30% of its design capacity, if it operates at all, so increasingly “people have to fetch water from often contaminated sources of water....” (Richards, *et al.*, 2009a, 3). Contributing to the sorry state of water and sewer systems is the failed attempt by the central government about 5 years ago to centralize its operation in several towns and cities, reportedly in an effort to control the largest local revenue source (Richards, *et al.*, 2009b, 4–5).

## CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe’s system of local governance, an integral part of a national regime tentatively emerging from crisis, has much to overcome in the years ahead. It will take policy reform, institutional development, and persistence over time to make the best of the post-crisis transition, assuming progress is favorable at the national level.

The first and obvious challenge is the affect of national political and economic developments on the local level. Zimbabwe’s once-model local institutions of government have suffered tremendously over the past decade from economic decline and from political polarization rooted in the rise of MDC opposition to the regime. Clearly, the best outcome for local authorities and all Zimbabweans would be the achievement of a stable national consensus on the basis of increased respect for democracy and on secure, sustainable, long-term economic growth. The critical steps forward, which would lead to an end to international sanctions, are achieving the reforms cited in the GPA, agreement on a new constitution, and democratic election of a new president.

The second challenge is improving intergovernmental relations while decentralizing. Strong centralization allows national politics to intrude heavily into local affairs and also makes it difficult for local officials to respond effectively to eminently local concerns. The local authorities’ long tradition of engaging in service delivery and

<sup>14</sup>Interview, May 7, 2009.

Table 5. Response to the question: How would you describe the state of service delivery today (% of total responses)?

Service/service rating	Health	Education	Transport/roads	Water and sanitation	Housing
Excellent	3.3	2.7	1.6	3.8	0.5
Good	18.7	9.9	7.1	7.7	9.9
Fair	41.8	33.5	23.1	24.2	41.2
Poor	30.2	42.3	53.3	54.4	36.3
Non-existent	1.1	2.2	4.9	2.2	1.6
DK/NA	4.9	9.3	9.9	7.7	10.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*N* = 182, total number of survey respondents and includes only the councilors from 12 local authorities; DK/NA, did not know or no answer.

Table 6. Service delivery challenges as reported by all local officials

Challenge	Frequency mentioned among top three issues (in descending order by % of <i>N</i> )
Finance	92.6
Equipment and machinery	87.5
Material stocks	82.4
Accessible roads	80.9
Land for housing	71.9
Human capital	65.6

Note: *N* = 256. Respondents include all local officials.

mobilizing revenue in a variety of ways points to a system that offers popularly elected local officials significant latitude to operate autonomously. The larger institutional framework, however, allows local authorities to be ignored, controlled, or co-opted with relative ease. Local officials derive their authority from the MLG, not from a constitutionally protected commitment to local government. Their ability to provide services in critical areas is restricted by tradition, contravening laws, and the actions of the MLG. Elected officials are removed from office for purely political reasons, moreover, and the administration is subject to ministry approval of budgets, by-laws, staff, and other matters.

Given the apparent support expressed in the GPA annex, the new constitution might well include the establishment of local government. Further legislative reform would allow local authorities increased freedom to act on, for example, the annual budget, finance, and passage of by-laws. National political and socioeconomic stability alone should also lessen manipulation of intergovernmental relations for political ends, improve national–local coordination, regenerate local revenue, and eventually depolarize local politics.

Third, local authorities face local challenges. The relative inexperience of mayors and councilors, the large majority of whom are serving in their first terms of office, underscores the lack of local capacity. It also leaves elected officials dependent on centrally approved town clerks and department heads who generally have many more years of experience. Communities or local associations are often highly politicized, and local council activities are likewise seen as highly political, so few Zimbabweans—especially those perceived to be from the opposing party—get involved, and most lose interest in local affairs. Most decisions, including those involving the budget, have already been made by the time the wards are consulted, and the prioritization of expenditures is usually carried out exclusively by the councils.

Local authorities' coffers and the revenue base on which they once relied are largely depleted, although a return to sustained economic growth will help in this regard. Local officials have, for years, been without fiscal transfers from the central government, which are typically a mainstay of local financial solvency in developing countries. Although many local authorities have adapted to the lack of central support by creatively raising revenue through

taxes and service fees and profit-making commercial activities, the shortfall is severe. External funding and in-kind assistance directly to beneficiaries from local organizations and the international NGO community are essential lifelines for local authorities. What income local officials can generate is dedicated to wages, repairs, and general expenses, leaving virtually no funding for capital investment or service improvements that can support critically needed development.

Local authorities' ability to provide or simply maintain service levels has thus declined precipitously, if not come to a halt. When one considers that, in transitional environments, the ability to restore the provision of public goods and services is critical to building state legitimacy and stability<sup>15</sup>, the decline in services takes on national implications. In addition to the severe financial constraints, equipment and machinery are often either inadequate or non-functioning; material stocks are insufficient to keep the services operating, and professional staff is in short supply. Local officials have minimal options in addressing these needs, and they often jury-rig some solution to address the issue at hand at least temporarily.

As we have seen, the country's descent into electoral authoritarianism and economic crisis are, naturally, deeply reflected within the institutions of local governance. If in the coming years, however, Zimbabwean policymakers can agree on change that couples the best features of the existing local system—the wide scope for service provision, revenue generation, and elected authorities—with a few fundamental reforms, particularly the constitutional provision for local government and measures to increase autonomy, then local authorities will have a chance to reclaim their place among Africa's finest.

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<sup>15</sup>See Brinkerhoff, (2005), 6.