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Zimbabwe in Transition: What About the Local Level?

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Zimbabwe in Transition: What About the Local Level?

Gary Bland

Abstract

The world's attention has remained focused on critical national events in Zimbabwe as the country has moved from the turmoil of 2008 to the establishment of the current Inclusive Government. In the process, the country's 90 newly elected local governments have been largely ignored. This brief summarizes our effort to close that informational gap. It provides the results of our extensive research on local governance in Zimbabwe from May to June 2009. Through survey interviews with more than 250 local officials in 15 local authorities, we examined four areas. First, we found that local administration officials are much better educated and more experienced than local elected officials, which has significant ramifications for local governance. Second, we discovered that local officials believe that public participation in local government is strong. However, we found that citizen involvement is actually quite weak. Third, local authorities are doing their best to operate with minimal resources. Financial transfers from the central government dried up long ago, and because of the economic situation, revenue generation is poor. Finally, our research captures the poor state of public services, especially health care and basic infrastructure. We include some ideas for reform and recovery in the conclusion.

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Description

The crisis of democracy and development in Zimbabwe has been a subject of world concern for more than a decade. As the end of the first decade of this century approached, Zimbabwe, once considered to be an example in many ways for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, was suffering through unbridled socioeconomic and political deterioration. Following another violence-marred election in 2008 and amid international condemnation of the results, a window of opportunity for change tentatively opened. By September 2008, the Mugabe government and the political opposition, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, 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 took effect in February 2009, created Zimbabwe's Inclusive Government and provided for constitutional reform as well as other measures considered essential for increasing the opportunity for democratic politics and governance to succeed. Constitutional reform was expected to set the stage for elections within two years. As of mid-2010, the parties to the accord were engaged in an extended period of negotiations over commitments made in the GPA. The Inclusive Government has labored to make progress as differences have emerged among the political parties that are represented in government.

Indicating the significance of local government to the restoration of public institutions, the GPA includes, in the annex, a draft constitutional reform dedicated in part to the development of local governments. If reform actually occurs, local government authority would be constitutionally enshrined for the first time ever. The principles of democratic election, decentralization, and provision of sufficient local finances would ostensibly be protected.

That said, media coverage and commentary on Zimbabwe in recent years has almost exclusively addressed concerns at a national level—persistent autocracy, ministerial autonomy, land confiscation, parliamentary balance of power, human rights violations, and macroeconomic stability, to note a few of the central issues. Local government receives

essentially no mention at all. Yet the lack of attention to local government belies its significance to the tentative transition underway in Zimbabwe today. This is because the 2008 national election also included elections for all 90 local governments—and the political opposition (both parties of the Movement for Democratic Change [MDC])* won a majority in all but one of the urban councils and in nearly half of the rural councils.¹ These newly elected local officials were suddenly facing the steep challenge of governing in post-crisis conditions, forging relations with entrenched administrative officials from the ruling party, and serving constituents with strong expectations for some improvement in their quality of life. As these trends have evolved, the international community has seen work to strengthen local governance as a means of helping countries like Zimbabwe emerge from conflict and crisis environments.

This paper summarizes the results of extensive survey-based research on local government in Zimbabwe, carried out by RTI International and the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for Zimbabwe (IDAZIM) in May and June 2009. Our team surveyed 256 local elected and administrative officials and nine groups of community representatives in 15 local authorities. The objective was to rigorously examine the state of local governance and the intergovernmental system at a critical juncture in Zimbabwe's history.

Assessment

The primary motivation for the study is the absence of current and comprehensive insight into the operations of local government during the Inclusive Government. Current analysis of Zimbabwean local governance is difficult to find. Scholarly studies of decentralization or of the local councils are uncommon, and even the most recent are a few years old now.^{2,3} In fact, the Inclusive Government is only a year and a half old, so this research is the first of its

* The MDC actually comprises two parties—one MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC-T) and another led by Arthur Mutambara (MDC-M). The party split in 2005; the MDC-T is much larger than the MDC-M. The ruling party is President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

kind under the transitional regime. International aid donors are slowly re-engaging at the local level. They are producing highly technical reports or general assessments of the local situation,^{4,5} however, rather than the deeper, analytical understanding of local governance that our research seeks to provide.

Capturing the local experience early in any transition is essential in examining developments and designing assistance activities over the long term. Improving local governance and development is one way to demonstrate that government is working again in post-conflict settings.⁶ Local governments provide proximity to citizens, allowing for participatory approaches and a reconnection of government and civil society around local concerns. Working locally allows for a diversity of representation (political, ethnic, etc.) and for responses tailored to local circumstances. Perhaps most importantly, compared to the distant central government, local governments can more effectively provide public goods and services that have been sorely lacking. A reasonably quick and effective restoration of services can be central to the restoration of state legitimacy because citizen expectations for change are high.

Demographic Implications. Our research targeted four major areas of primary concern regarding the effective operation of local government in the

developing world. We focused first on gathering demographic information about our sample of local officials and then examined three institutional features: participatory governance, finance, and service delivery. The data we collected on the education level and professional experience of elected officials and administrative staff provides valuable insights. As Table 1 shows, mayors (or chairpersons, in rural areas) 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 a university degree, college diploma/certificate, or a graduate degree. About one-fifth of the mayors and councilors had degrees or diplomas; graduate degrees among this group were unusual. We found that 14 percent of the councilors had no more than a primary school education.

Figure 1 illustrates that 57 percent of the mayors and 78 percent of the councilors in our sample were in their first terms and therefore had been serving for about one year at the time of this study. Yet the town clerks in our sample had been serving in their positions for more than 17 years on average! The average length of service for other administrative staff

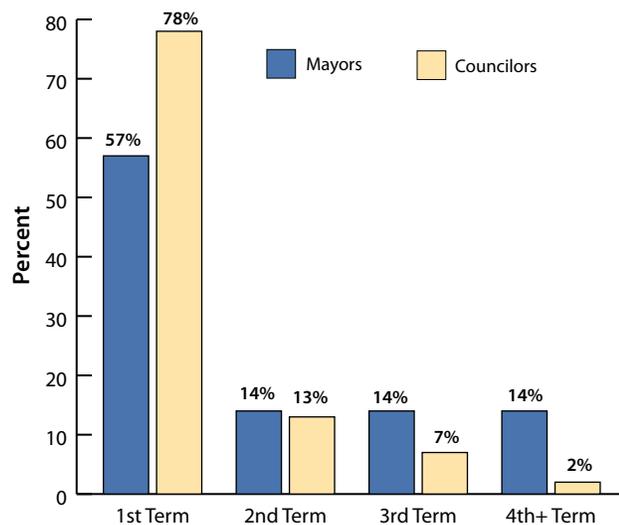
Table 1. Demographic characteristics of mayors, councilors, and senior administration officials in sampled local authorities

| Local Official | Average Age in Years | Highest Level of Education Achieved (percent 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 | |
| Elected | | | | | | |
| Mayors/Chairs (<i>n</i> = 14) | 47.5 | 0 (0%) | 8 (57%) | 3 (21%) | 1 (7%) | 7% |
| Councilors (<i>n</i> = 223) | 45.6 | 32 (14%) | 106 (48%) | 44 (20%) | 1 (.01%) | 15% |
| Appointed | | | | | | |
| Town Clerks/ Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) (<i>n</i> = 12) | 54.2 | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 6 (50%) | 6 (50%) | 0% |
| Remaining Administration Officials (<i>n</i> = 80) | 44.1 | 0 (0%) | 4 (.05%) | 49 (61%) | 27 (34%) | 19% |

Note: *N* = number of officials who provided their personal data. In the age column, *n* = 13 for mayors, 212 for councilors, 12 for clerks/CEOs, and 76 for remaining administrative officials because not all answered the age question.

was a little over 10 years. With limited experience as well as less education, elected officials are at a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis the administrators with respect to their experience managing local affairs. In addition, as Table 1 shows, women are poorly represented in local government. The imbalance in education and experience between the elected officials, many of whom are now from the MDC, and the administrative staff, most of whom were appointed by the ruling party's minister of local government, further fuels the political tension within the local authorities.

Figure 1. Mayors' and councilors' experience in local authorities



Participatory Governance. Local governance in Zimbabwe is characterized by high levels of patronage and clientelism. Local officials reported that they receive various types of individual requests—for jobs, favors, and money—and are expected to help resolve them. Answering these personal petitions is the currency of local politics; in an environment of scarcity, it fills needs and brings votes.

In addition, more than 70 percent of officials in our sample reported that public participation in the local government is strong. With the support of international aid, participatory budgeting has been introduced in years past in several municipalities.⁷ We found, however, that participation is actually quite weak. Local elected officials tend to take a limited view of participation. Any interaction is viewed as

participatory, and they often cited their consultations with citizens around the budget process as evidence of citizen involvement. In most instances, we found that participation in an event was limited to political party allies, which kept communities politically divided and discouraged broader citizen involvement. Although budget consultations tend to help ratify decisions, there is little actual deliberation or public role in making the decisions. Community associations further complained of a lack of transparency.

Local Finances. The financial situation that local authorities in Zimbabwe endured over the past decade, culminating as it did with hyperinflation, was severe. We found that it remains at near-crisis level. With respect to revenue generation, local officials have long been forced to be self-sufficient; fiscal transfers from the central government essentially dried up years ago. Nearly all of the local officials interviewed (98.4 percent) reported that they either did not receive fiscal transfers or that such transfers were insufficient. Amid the crisis, communities' incentive to pay taxes and fees for public services they were not receiving crumbled along with the infrastructure, and their ability to pay now is restricted by declining incomes and rising poverty.

When asked about the most important sources of revenue they generate, as shown in Table 2, local officials cited property taxes, license fees for businesses and vehicles, and public service fees. Local officials occasionally mentioned the varied marketing or sales activities in which they engage. They draw revenue from traditional liquor sales, for example, as well as sales of land, shops, pigs and other livestock, and jatropha plants. Local authorities 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, pipes, and other needed materials) from international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations, and donors.

As for spending, as demonstrated in Table 3, the officials reported that wages consume a large share of budgets, and general operating expenses are significant. Infrastructure repair is reportedly the third budgetary priority. Capital investment is

virtually nonexistent, given the lack of resources. As local officials, elected and otherwise, made clear, the local authorities are not addressing larger quality-of-life and development issues, such as investments in services or local economic development.

Responses from the town clerks/CEOs and other administrative staff (the only officials who consistently provided figures) indicated that salary payments consume 28–60 percent of their respective budgets. (Only one CEO from a rural district council reported the salary level at 16 percent of the budget.)

Elected officials complained of the large staff expense as well.

Public Service Delivery. Service provision is also in crisis mode among local authorities. Local authorities report, as Table 4 shows, that they are involved most importantly in providing water and sanitation, primary health care, and road maintenance. Mayors/chairs also mentioned refuse collection.

Local officials frequently noted that while they were providing these services, they were only doing so minimally—often just barely scraping by or relying on

Table 2. Response to question: What are the councils' three main sources of local revenue?

| Local Officials | Number of Times Mentioned Among Top Three (percent 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. |
| Councillors (<i>n</i> = 227) | N.A. | 154 (67.8%) | N.A. | 182 (80.2%) | 169 (74.6%) |

N = total number of survey respondents. *n* = number of survey respondents by type of local official. N.A. = not applicable; issue was not mentioned among top three. Note: Administration officials, interviewed as a group, include the town clerk, heads of department, and other officials; the composition of the group varied by local authority.

Table 3. Response to question: What are the three largest expenditures in the budget?

| Local Officials | Number of Times Mentioned Among Top Three (percent of <i>N</i>) | | | |
|---|--|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Wages | General Expenses (including 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. |
| Councillors (<i>n</i> = 227) | 203 (89.4%) | 166 (73.1%) | N.A. | 116 (51.1%) |

N = total number of survey respondents. *n* = number of survey respondents by type of local official. N.A. = not applicable; issue was not mentioned among top three. Note: Some 86 percent of the councillors mentioned "other," which includes a variety of items that do not fit into a single category. Administration officials, interviewed as a group, include the town clerk, heads of department, and other officials; the composition of the group varied by local authority.

Table 4. Response to question: What are the three most important services the council is providing to the community?

| Local Officials | Number of Times Mentioned Among Top Three (percent of <i>N</i>) | | | |
|---|--|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | Water and Sanitation | Refuse Collection | Road Maintenance | Primary Health Care |
| Mayors/Chairs (<i>n</i> = 14) | 8 (57.1%) | 10 (71.4%) | N.A. | 7 (50.0%) |
| Administration Officials (<i>n</i> = 15) | 14 (93.3%) | N.A. | 5 (33.3%) | 11 (78.6%) |
| Councillors (<i>n</i> = 194) | 103 (53.1%) | N.A. | 64 (33.0%) | 97 (50.0%) |
| Totals (<i>n</i> = 223) | 125 (56.1%) | 10 (4.5%) | 69 (30.9%) | 115 (51.6%) |

N = total number of survey respondents. *n* = number of survey respondents by type of local official. N.A. = not applicable; issue was not mentioned among top three. Note: Administration officials, interviewed as a group, include the town clerk, heads of department, and other officials; the composition of the group varied by local authority.

financial support from some external source, usually an international NGO. In a number of instances, local officials replied that they were simply not providing any services because there was no money to pay for service provision. Virtually all of the local officials recognized that community residents could not afford to pay much, if anything, for the services provided. (Many reported that residents were not paying what they should.) Central government ministries, moreover, are supposed to be supporting local health care, water in rural areas, salaries for teachers, and other public services. But in fact, any such support, if received, was hardly sufficient.

With one exception, every mayor and community association considered service delivery to be either fair or poor, with the large majority reporting that service was poor. In contrast, surveyed local administration officials, who are charged with overseeing services on a day-to-day basis, tended to be more optimistic; 80 percent reported services were fair, while the rest reported that services were on the poor end. As Table 5 demonstrates, councilors considered service delivery to be dismal in important service areas. Over 70 percent 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 to be poor.

What specifically are the challenges local authorities face in attempting to meet service needs? The lack of financial resources tops the list—more than 9 out of 10 local officials mentioned this problem among the top three. Local authorities are simply starved

of the needed funding (though the situation has probably improved slightly over the past year, given the stabilization of the economy since 2009). Another core challenge is equipment and machinery. Even if local authorities are lucky enough to have the proper item, their machines and equipment are often in poor condition or inoperative, or they have been cannibalized so that something else can be put to use. Nearly 90 percent of the local officials noted this as among the top three problems. Finally, as mentioned by more than 80 percent of local officials, finding sufficient material stocks—pipes, tanks, lights, etc.—to keep services functioning is a serious difficulty.

Conclusion

Given the political turmoil and economic collapse that has enveloped Zimbabwe over the past decade, it is not terribly surprising to conclude that local governance has been in crisis as well. The contribution of our research lies in identifying the particular problems facing the Zimbabwean local system today.

First, we found that many local elected officials, and administration staff as well, are unprepared for the job of governing. They frequently have neither the education nor the experience to know their rights and responsibilities, to set policy, and to ensure that the local administration effectively carries out that policy. In such a heavily politicized environment, this lack of knowledge and experience can be a significant disadvantage, and it can foster misunderstandings that produce further political tension. Providing

Table 5. Councilors' responses to the question: How would you describe the state of service delivery today? (percent of *N*)

| 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% |
| Nonexistent | 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% |

DK/NA = respondents who did not know or did not answer the question. *N* = total number of survey respondents.

Note: *N* = 182 and includes only the councilors from 12 local authorities.

practical training for all local elected officials would be a helpful step forward.

Second, critical to the progress of local governance is the introduction of citizens into the governing process. The political environment is so troubled that even initial steps toward more participatory and publicly deliberative government can help restore faith in the effectiveness and ability of local government to serve the locality.

Third, at the time of our research, local authorities reported being financially depleted. As the economy recovers, the financial situation should improve somewhat. The absence of any financial support from the central government is nonetheless a major issue. The prospects for development, in accordance with macroeconomic stability, of a rational system for intergovernmental fiscal transfers should be seriously examined.

Finally, non-functioning services and deteriorated infrastructure is a severe problem—giving rise to deadly water-borne diseases such as cholera—particularly in the three most important areas identified by local officials: water and sanitation, road repair, and health care. The legitimacy of Zimbabwe's local political system rests on its ability to provide services, an ability that once served as a model for Africa. Large-scale international support for reconstruction of services and related infrastructure will be required to gradually restore normalcy.

The best hope for the local government system is achieving a national consensus based on respect for democracy and securing sustainable, long-term economic growth. Yet, as we have seen in our research, it is unlikely that democratic and economic stability can be achieved without also paying attention to the requirements of good local governance.

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